

ALFRED

JANUARY 35¢ K

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of **SUSPENSE**

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Dear Readers:

Nothing halts the inexorable march of time, nor the turning of the earth on its axis, and so we come once again to the holiday season. For the seventh year in succession, since my fine publication,

AHMM, first saw the light of day and made its debut on the newsstands, I am on hand to wish you and yours a Merry Christmas. The costume which I wear on this month's cover is thus particularly appropriate I am sure you will agree.

Christmas cheer comes in many forms . . . in boxes, bales, bottles and cans. Last but not least, it may come in the form of my delightful little magazine. May I direct your attention, since we are on the subject, to pages 69 & 70 of this month's issue. You will find there a suggestion for a lasting form of Christmas cheer, to be sent to your nearest and dearest, or to friends whom you wish to remind of your esteem at least once a month, during the coming year. We have printed a few gift certificates for your convenience, but we were limited by the size of the page. You need not be so limited . . . just send us your list of names and addresses and a check or money order for the appropriate amount, and we will send the fortunate recipients of your largesse a gift card, informing them of the delights to be theirs during the coming year. Now what could be fairer than that?

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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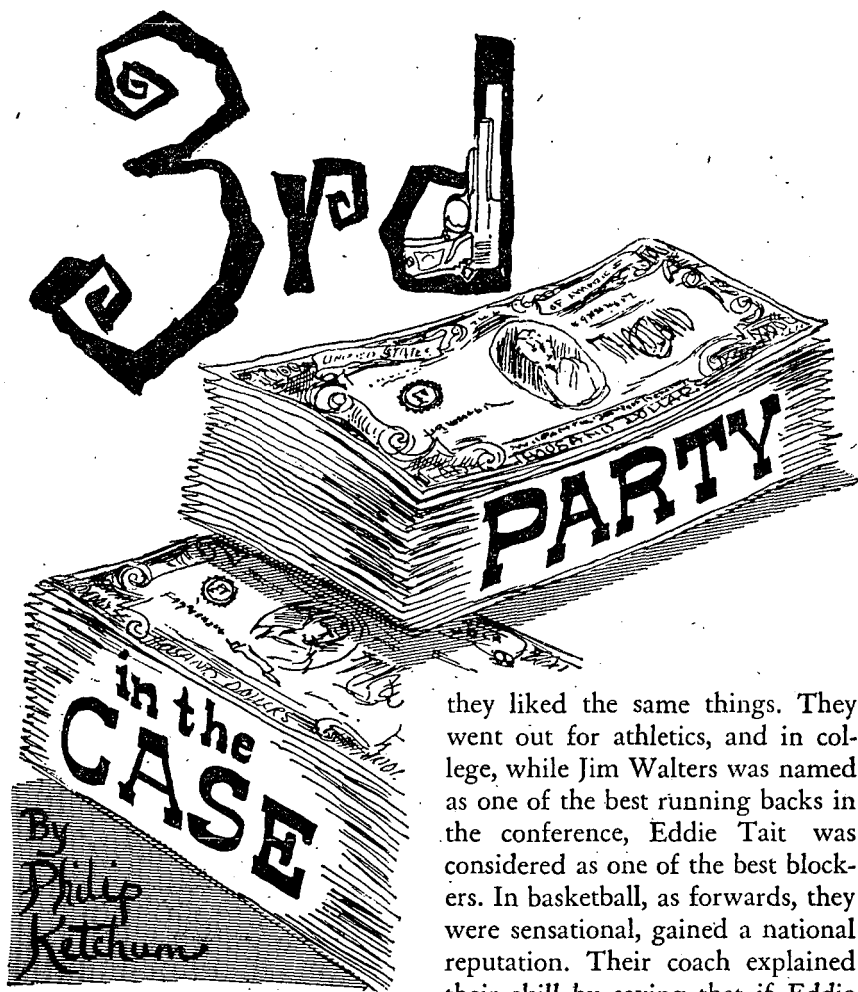
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THROUGH grade school, junior high, high school and college they had been inseparable companions, and of course, all the way, they maintained a casual rivalry. Their grades were average, their I.Q. rating exactly the same. In general

they liked the same things. They went out for athletics, and in college, while Jim Walters was named as one of the best running backs in the conference, Eddie Tait was considered as one of the best blockers. In basketball, as forwards, they were sensational, gained a national reputation. Their coach explained their skill by saying that if Eddie got the ball, he did not have to look to see where Jim was. He knew instinctively where to pass the ball. And this worked the other way. Their minds seemed to be completely attuned to each other. Their thoughts ran in the same

Greed has proven to be the downfall of many a criminal; it isn't smart to be greedy. The foregoing observations, made by one of the characters in this story, are as apt a comment as any, I am sure you will agree.



channels, their gestures matched.

This led them to a little difficulty, for it was not unlikely that they would get interested in the same girl. They had several quarrels during college but they patched them up. At least they patched up all but one. In their senior year in college, a junior transfer named Lydia Baumer came to the school, and she was something special. They traded dates with her, both fell in love with her, neither wanted to give her up.

In the end, Jim Walters was the lucky one to marry her. Eddie served as best man. He stood through the wedding ceremony with a frozen smile on his face. Afterwards, he kissed Lydia on the cheek and wished her well. He tried to seem genuinely pleased. He put on a good act. Without much question no one but Jim Walters knew that he was boiling up inside.

Before Jim and Lydia went away on their honeymoon, Jim and Eddie had a brief meeting in one of the upper rooms of Lydia's

home. No one else was present.

"Well, Eddie?" Jim said.

Eddie shrugged. "What do you want me to say? I hate your guts—and you know it."

"I would have felt the same way, if you had married her."

"That's a lot of help."

"What are you going to do, Eddie?"

"I don't know—yet."

"What about the plans we've made?"

"I don't know."

Jim spoke slowly. "I don't have much money. Neither does Lydia. Neither do you. Before very long I'll be needing money, so will you."

"So we both need money," Eddie said.

"We work together pretty well."

"We tried two jobs."

"Weren't they smooth?"

Eddie motioned vaguely. "All right, I'll think about it. When you come back, give me a ring."

"We'll be back in two weeks," Jim said. "See you then."

He didn't offer to shake hands. Eddie said nothing more. He turned away, left the house, went

to the small apartment where he lived, and got out a bottle of bourbon, took a stiff drink.

He had another, and another, and another. He got bitter, profane. He could picture in detail just how Jim and Lydia would spend that night—and the next night, and the next, and the next and all the days that were ahead. He had more bourbon, but that did not help. He remembered a girl with whom he could spend the night, but he didn't want her. He wanted Lydia—only he would never have her. She belonged to Jim Walters. The hate he was feeling made him shaky.

He was twenty-three, tall, solidly built. His looks might have been average. He was not too handsome, his features were not unpleasant. He would not stand out in a crowd, but that was fine. There were times when he would not want to be noticed. In a way, this was true of Jim Walters. He wasn't flashy. He fitted into the crowd. What was special about him was the way his mind worked, quickly, decisively, and in a pattern which Eddie had learned—for he thought the same way.

A year ago when he and Jim had still been in college they had been taking a walk one night, grouching about being almost broke. They had been in the lower part of

town, had seen a man leaving a tavern, staggering, hardly able to walk.

"Let's help him," Jim said.

"He needs it," Eddie said.

They caught up with the man and as Eddie steadied him, Jim reached under the man's coat, took out his wallet. As the man started to cry out, Eddie cracked the back of his neck, stunned him. By that time Jim had taken the money from the wallet, had replaced the wallet in the man's coat pocket. Together, then, they propped the man in a doorway—and left him. Not a step of this had been planned, but when Jim had reached for the wallet, Eddie had known instinctively what Jim meant to do.

A number of times after that they pulled the same stunt, working quickly, efficiently, working as though by pattern. But this had not produced any real money. The average drunk usually had already spent his money. If they were going to take a chance, they might as well try something that would pay. They drove to a neighboring town one night, hit a liquor store which was open late, and drove away with nearly three thousand dollars. No trouble. They tried a filling station about four months later. That job had paid fifteen hundred. And they had no trouble.

Eddie had almost a thousand

dollars left, but of course a thousand dollars wouldn't last forever. Possibly, Jim had saved even more but two weeks of a honeymoon would be expensive. Unless he was badly mistaken, Jim would be broke when he got home. He could take a job, of course, but he wouldn't want to—any more than Eddie did. That meant they would have to try another job.

The bourbon was nearly gone, and Eddie was having a difficult time thinking clearly. But he was trying, and in his mind he was setting up two images of Jim Walters. One was the Jim who had married Lydia—and he hated that Jim with so much bitterness it made him sick. The other Jim was an efficient machine, thoughtful, clever, ruthless if necessary, and equal to almost any possible emergency. If possible, he would like to work with Jim—the machine. He would forget the Jim who was married to Lydia. At least, he would try.

Jim and Lydia returned from their honeymoon and within a few days Lydia telephoned Eddie, to invite him to dinner. Eddie avoided this, offering a plausible excuse. If he was to work with Jim, the machine, he couldn't look at Jim, the husband. He could not risk seeing Lydia.

That same week, Jim and Eddie tried a payroll job. It worked out nicely, no complications, and they walked off with over fifteen thousand dollars. Split into two parts, they each had a year's income. If you were conservative in what you spent, Eddie knew he wouldn't be able to be conservative. He doubted that Jim would. Anyhow, and just to get away from Lydia, Eddie took a trip to Mexico.

He tried Mexico City, and liked it. He flew on to Rio, and liked it there. He met a number of women but he didn't get seriously interested in anyone. After about three months most of his money was gone so he came home and telephoned Jim Walters.

"I've been expecting to hear from you," Jim said over the telephone. "How's your money holding out?"

"It isn't," Eddie admitted.

"Mine isn't either," Jim said.

"Have you got a job in mind?"

"I have two lined up."

"Worth it?"

"I think so. Where are you?"

"Downtown. Webster hotel."

"Remember Taggart's Tavern? Meet me there in an hour."

"In an hour," Eddie said.

Taggart's was on a side street. It usually wasn't crowded. Jim was there, at the bar, when Eddie came in, and Jim saluted him by lifting his glass. "Order your own

poison," he called. "Here's to you."

Eddie took beer. Then, he and Jim stood at the bar and didn't say much. Eddie was uncomfortable. He knew Jim felt the same way. Finally, Eddie made a try at covering the past few months. "I've been traveling. Enjoyed it but it cost. Carried a portable typewriter. I told people I was a writer."

"I've been selling insurance," Jim said. "Not much, but it's a cover. I play a lot of golf. You can spend money at home just as well as if you travel."

Eddie wanted to ask about Lydia, but he didn't. Jim looked in wonderful condition. Without any question, he and Lydia were getting along fine. In his heart, Eddie had known they would. He scowled at his beer and spoke gruffly, "Why not get down to business?"

"We'll take a booth," Jim said.

He was smiling as he made that suggestion, and he straightened up. Jim Walters, just as much as Eddie, was anxious to get down to business.

They talked for twenty minutes. The two jobs Jim suggested were in two suburban towns, similar to the town where they lived. One was an out-and-out robbery, but of a rather exclusive club where they might be able to make quite a haul. The other job was a payroll job.

Jim had studied both jobs. Neither was a pushover but if they worked quickly, got in and got out and didn't run into any bad luck, the results would be worth it.

Eddie didn't hesitate for a moment. He had decided ahead of time that he needed Jim Walters, his planning and decisive action. He knew Jim was uneasy about him, and he was uneasy about Jim. But if they were out on a job together, depending on each other, he knew he could count on Jim. He knew Jim felt that way about him. From a business standpoint, or from a criminal standpoint, they made a good team, a perfect team.

After their talk, they left, and Jim headed for home. Eddie went to his hotel, but on the way, bought a fifth of bourbon. He would need it tonight. Tomorrow he would meet Jim and for the next two days they would be together—but that was all right—that was business. Tonight, however, Jim was going home to Lydia and it wasn't easy for Eddie to remember that. Possibly, the bourbon would help. Of course it didn't.

Eddie checked out of the hotel the next morning. He took a cab to the airport, where he was met by Jim Walters who was driving a three year old car. It looked just like thousands of other old cars, nothing distinguished about it.

They drove to Rockwell, had lunch in a crowded cafeteria, drove on to Webber City and just after dusk entered the Wayfarers Club. This was just at the cocktail hour. A good many people were about, but it is doubtful if many noticed the two men who entered the club manager's office. He was easily frightened. He opened his safe and at that moment felt a blow on his head. When he awoke the two men who had frightened him were gone, and the safe had been looted. More than twenty-five thousand dollars was gone.

Jim and Eddie spent less than eight minutes in the Wayfarers Club, most of that time sauntering toward the club manager's office, or walking away. They were in the club manager's office just a little more than three minutes. In the next thirty minutes they were twenty miles away, and had checked into a motel. They had several drinks, then a good dinner.

"If we can do as well tomorrow, we ought to be set up for the next year," Jim said. "How do you feel, Eddie?"

"You're thinking we shouldn't try this too many times," Eddie guessed.

"That's it," Jim said. "We work by pattern. If we tried this too many times, the police would see the pattern, would start after us. I think

if we are clever about this, if we handle only about a couple jobs a year, we could get by for a long time."

Eddie nodded. This was sensible, he knew. If they tried another job, and another, and another, and another, sooner or later they would run into a trap. Greed had proved to be the downfall of many a criminal. It wasn't smart to be greedy.

"You ought to settle down," Jim said. "You ought to dabble with some kind of job. Take me for instance. I sell insurance. People don't wonder if I spend a little money. I'm supposed to sell a policy now and then."

Eddie smiled sourly. "Didn't you know I was a budding writer?"

"You need something more ordinary. Why don't you settle down somewhere and advertise that you're a tax consultant. You wouldn't have to take any jobs—say you were busy."

"I'll think about it," Eddie said.

Jim looked at his watch, then stood up. "Have to make a telephone call. I'll see you in the room."

"Sure," Eddie said. But he was scowling as Jim walked away—to telephone Lydia. That was the person he was calling. Eddie could sense it. Lydia! He could see her in his imagination—tall, slender, beautiful, smiling, her eyes spar-

klings. Where would he ever find another Lydia? But of course he never would. It was time to dig out the bourbon.

The payroll they were interested in was to be delivered in an armored car. But five minutes after the payroll was delivered and after the guards left, Jim and Eddie moved in. It took them less than five more minutes to cower a small office force, pick up the payroll money, and leave. They had practically no trouble at all.

They made a good haul. Twenty-five thousand from the club and thirty-two thousand from the payroll totaled fifty-seven thousand. Divided, Jim and Eddie received twenty-eight thousand five hundred, each. Not bad for two days' work.

In the mid afternoon, Jim dropped Eddie at the airport. From there, Eddie would take a shuttle plane to Washington. There was no more indiscriminate crowd than those on a shuttle plane.

"Don't know exactly where I'll go," Eddie said. "I'll drop you a card."

"Put some roots down somewhere," Jim said. "You might even get married."

"I might at that," Eddie said.

But he didn't mean it, and as Jim drove away he watched the car until it was lost in a curving

ramp. His smile was gone. His lips had tightened. And inside, he felt the same bitter hate as on the day Jim and Lydia were married.

During the next five years Eddie did settle down—in a way. That is, he took a modest apartment in Miami Beach, and spent most of his time there. He tanned himself on the beach. He went swimming. He took up golf. In the evenings he tried the dog tracks or jai alai. A number of women moved into and out of his life. One he thought might become permanent, but after a trial she could not measure up to Lydia, or at least to his conception of what Lydia was like. Once or twice a year he would hear from Jim Walters, and would join him. They averaged about three jobs a year—and never did they have any trouble. Jim picked the jobs very carefully. They moved in quickly, then moved out. They averaged close to fifty thousand dollars a year, each, on what they picked up this way.

At the beginning of the sixth year of their partnership, Jim telephoned Eddie from Cleveland. He never telephoned from his home, or from near there: And he never said much which might have been revealing. He was very cautious about what he said.

"How's the sun down there?" he asked. "Wish I could get there, but I can't."

"It's been a hot summer," Eddie answered. "In fact, I could stand a little of your autumn weather."

"It has been pleasant here," Jim said. "I'm going to get away next weekend, head for the hills. But that's all the time I can give up. When I make it to Miami Beach I want more than a few days. I'll try to make it next year."

"Next year then," Eddie said. "Don't get lost in the hills."

"I won't. Take care of yourself," Jim said. Then he hung up, but the mention of getting away for a week-end was a signal. Something was cooking—another job.

Eddie packed a brief case. He carried very little baggage. Extra underwear, one shirt, shaving material, and a gift package. The gift package held a gun. His gun. The gift wrapping was just a way to carry it. Then, after he had packed Eddie had to make a telephone call, break a date. That was simple enough. In another hour he was at the airport, waiting to board a plane to New York.

No one met him in New York, but then he hadn't expected to be met. Jim couldn't have known what plane he would take. Anyhow, to get to where he and Jim would meet was no real prob-

lem. A taxi carried him to midtown Manhattan, and the Statler. Through Jim, a reservation was on file. Eddie went up to his room, telephoned for a bottle of bourbon and ice, and sat down to wait.

He did not have to wait too long. Jim came in right after the bourbon and ice. He was carrying a light top coat and a newspaper and he tossed them on the bed.

"Drink?" Eddie suggested.

"I'll fix it," Jim said. "Any problem about getting away?"

"Had to break a date," Eddie said. "But she wasn't really important."

"What did you tell her?"

"Said I had to go to New Orleans. She hates it there. Anyplace else, she'd have liked to tag along."

"Ummm," Jim said, and poured a drink. Then he said, "Eddie, I sure hope you covered your trip. I'm supposed to be in Cleveland, from where I telephoned. It's set up definitely, that I'm there, but not where I can be reached by telephone."

"I'm covered," Eddie said. "No one knows I'm here. Used another name. Didn't know anyone on the plane. What's up?"

Jim took a deep breath. "This is big—mighty big. If we put it across, we're really set. That's why I asked if you were covered. How will you leave?"

"Shuttle plane. Safest would be to take the one to Washington."

"No. Make it the Pennsylvania, and a coach. You can stand it on a railroad as far as Washington. Could be the airports will be watched."

"I could stay here for a time."

"No, I want you out of town."

"How will you get back to Cleveland?"

"I'll take a bus to Boston, fly to Cleveland from there."

Eddie poured another drink, but then hesitated. "Do we do the job tonight?"

"Yes, tonight," Jim said.

Eddie put the drink aside. "You might mention what we're going to do."

Jim nodded. He sat down on the edge of the bed. Gradually, during the past five years, he had put on a little weight. He wasn't actually fat but at least he was heavier, his neck thicker, his face more puffy. In a contrasting manner, Eddie was thinner, and deeply tanned. He drank too much, he had lived pretty loosely, but physically he was still in good shape.

"We just fell into this," Jim said, and he motioned to the newspaper on the bed. "Not a word of it in the newspapers, yet. Or to the police or the F.B.I. I got it by accident. Couldn't believe it at first, but it's true."

"What's true?" Eddie asked.

"Have you heard of T. T. Halburton?"

"Who hasn't? Doesn't he own half of Texas?"

"Just part of it, but it's all in oil. Lives there, but he has an apartment in Manhattan, too, on the Avenue—penthouse. His married daughter lives with him and she has a daughter. I mean, she did have a daughter. She's been kidnapped."

Eddie was frowning. "When did this happen?"

"Three days ago."

"How old is the girl?"

"About eleven."

"I don't want to cut into a kidnapping. You ought to know that."

"We're not cutting into it," Jim said. "We'll stay on the outside—but we'll pick up the ransom money."

"And what will happen to the little girl?"

"Eddie, she's already dead."

"You mean the kidnappers—"

"They didn't want to take any chances with her. They killed her—smothered her I think."

"How do you happen to know so much about it?"

Jim motioned with his arm. "As I told you, I just fell into it. I was out a couple nights ago, noticed a man in a tavern who was loaded,

picked him up and we walked out together. He started talking, mumbling what he had done, about a little girl and a lot of money. Eventually he mentioned a few names—T. T. Halburton, Mike Ellender, Herm Keller. You know who Halburton is. Mike Ellender and Herm Keller are two hoods. Eventually I got the full story. It almost scared me.”

Eddie was glad he hadn't taken another drink. He was listening carefully to Jim's story. So far it had come out in a very tailored fashion. It might be true, and again it might not. For the moment Eddie was puzzled. He should have been able to guess, instantly, whether or not Jim was telling the truth. Possibly their thinking had grown apart. He looked up and said, “Go on, Jim. What happened?”

“I didn't get the story all at once,” Jim said. “It came out in chunks. I had to put it together, but when I put it together it fits like this. Mike Ellender, Herm Keller, and the drunk I was with, kidnapped the little girl. They had her in a car—took her out on the island—and on the way she was smothered. They buried her near Farmington, drove back to a motel—the Briarcliff. You know where it is.”

“I know,” Eddie said. “Go on.”

“Well, that's about all—except another name was mentioned. Ben Cosgriff. He's a private detective, but he's in on it for a cut of the ransom. He telephoned T. T. Halburton, said he had received a telephone message from the kidnapers. That got Cosgriff to Halburton and it puts the ransom money into Cosgriff's hands. If the police stay out of the picture, and the F.B.I., Cosgriff will pick up the money—and deliver it. That's where we step in. We'll take the money.”

“One question,” Eddie said. “If you learned all this three days ago, what's been the delay? I thought kidnapers worked fast.”

“Three days—that's fast,” Jim said. “It took T. T. Halburton a day to get over the shock, then a couple days to gather half a million dollars, in old bills.”

“And how do we check on the delivery of the money?”

“That was easy. I happen to know Cosgriff's wife. She plays golf. We've become good friends.”

“Did you say half a million dollars?”

“Half a million. How do you like that?”

“I like that very much,” Eddie said, and he laughed.

But at the same time he was thinking harder than ever in his life. There was something wrong

with Jim's story. It was too coincidental, too pat, too impossible. He took a deep, shaky breath, glanced in the mirror, there he could see Jim watching him, a sardonic expression on his lips. An old truth came back to his mind. Jim had never liked him any more than he had liked Jim. From the very beginning they had used each other. They still did, but what if the time ever came when they didn't need each other—

"I've brought you a gun," Jim was saying. "I have another for myself. Cosgriff is no pushover."

"I don't like guns," Eddie said.

"We're talking about half a million dollars," Jim said.

Eddie scowled, but accepted the gun. It was a .32 automatic. Its clip was filled. Eddie tried the gun's mechanism. It seemed in perfect shape.

"Just put it in your pocket—in case," Jim said. "I'll go ahead of you, stop Cosgriff. You move in. If you can slug him, drop him, okay—but I warn you he's fast. He will be carrying a suitcase. I'll take it, we'll walk around the corner, grab a taxi. We'll make a couple changes before we get back here."

This was about as far as they went in making a plan. They set up an objective, outlined an approach and an escape. The details of the action they fitted to the

needs of the occasion as they arose.

The telephone rang. Jim answered it, seemed to be talking to someone named Helen and while this brief conversation continued it occurred to Eddie that if Jim could pick up half a million dollars, he wouldn't be needed any more. On the other hand, if he could take the half million, he didn't need Jim. Then he smiled wryly. If he was thinking that way, the same possibilities had occurred to Jim. Through a flash intuition Eddie could see what was ahead. Probably, with no trouble, he and Jim would pick up the ransom money. But what would happen then? What did Jim have in mind? He could feel a surging excitement. If this was the end of the road for one of them, he didn't mean to be the one to be dropped.

Jim hung up the telephone. "That was Helen Cosgriff. We have about five minutes before we have to leave."

Eddie frowned. "Does she know the score?"

"I don't know—but she won't waste any tears over Ben Cosgriff."

"Maybe she's interested in you?"

Jim laughed, and there was almost a taunting note in the sound. "At least I'm not interested in her. Lydia is all the woman I'll ever need. If you've been waiting for her, you're out of luck."

"I almost forget what Lydia looks like," Eddie said.

But he was lying. He could remember Lydia too well, and inside, right now, he was raging, resentful of what Jim had said. He looked away at the wall, briefly, not at all sure Jim had been truthful about his relationship to Lydia. At first, of course, they must have been close. But in six years things could have changed. With money and time on his hands, had Jim been faithful to Lydia? He doubted it very much.

"Time to get started," Jim said, and he stood up.

"All right with me," Eddie said.

He put the .32 in his coat pocket, and casually he felt the lumpy object under his shirt and to the side. The gun from the gift package in his briefcase. He had put the gun there before Jim arrived. He was glad the extra gun was there.

Jim and Eddie never had an easier job. They closed in on Ben Cosgriff, slugged him, took the suitcase he had been carrying, and after that Jim put a bullet through the man's head. That was so that later he couldn't identify who had taken the ransom money. Half a minute later, Jim and Eddie were out of the apartment lobby and around the corner. In another forty-five minutes and after changing

taxis they got back to the Statler and up to Eddie's room.

Every instant since they had picked up the money, Eddie had been tense, on guard, but Jim had scarcely glanced at him. He was tense, too, but Eddie expected that. As he unlocked the door to the room his tensions tightened. Whatever was going to happen between him and Jim Walters, would happen in this room—and very quickly. It occurred to him that Jim was just waiting for him to be careless—but he didn't intend to be careless.

Eddie had clicked on the lights as he opened the door. Now, he and Jim stepped inside, and Eddie stopped to close the door and to turn the door lock. He stayed there by the door, and said, "Jim, you can spread the money on the bed, or on the table."

"The bed will be all right," Jim said, and he walked that way, his back to the door.

Eddie spoke again. "I'm holding a gun. Maybe that's because I'm a little nervous."

"I knew you'd want all the money—and that you'd pull a gun," Jim said. "That's why I brought you one that wouldn't work."

He left the suitcase on the bed, whirled around, his own gun in his hand. A thin, tense, triumphant smile pulled at his lips.

Eddie glanced down at the gun he was holding. He could have smiled, too. The gun he held wasn't the one Jim had brought. It was the one which had been under his shirt—it would work perfectly.

"Had to do this," Jim said. "You see I'm neck deep in this kidnapping. Had to have someone who can carry some of the heat. You will do very nicely. That is—"

Eddie sensed a movement in the door to the bathroom. He heard the sharp crack of a gun, and Jim stiffened, uttered a sharp cry. He twisted half way toward the bathroom but then collapsed, his gun slipping from his hand. He fell against the bed, slipped to the floor.

In a rather vague manner, Eddie noticed the way Jim fell. He realized he was dead, but he hardly thought of that. He stared at the woman in the bathroom door—Lydia! Tall, slender, still beautiful. Of course she wasn't smiling now, but in time she would. And her eyes right now were hard with anger, but in time that look would disappear.

He lowered the gun he was holding, whispered the woman's name. "Lydia—Lydia—"

Lydia was staring at the figure on the floor. She spoke, but she seemed to be speaking to herself. "I should have done this long ago. You were never any good—never. That little girl you killed—"

"Jim did that!" Eddie gasped.

"Yes. But that's only part of what he's done. This time I followed him—to Cleveland and back here. This time—"

"If the years were bad for you, they were bad for me too," Eddie said. "We'll make up for them."

For the first time Lydia raised her head, looked at him, her eyes uncompromising, steady. "What did you say, Eddie?"

"I said we would make up for the bad years. I love you, Lydia. I always have."

She shook her head. "Love? What do you know of love? You are a copy of Jim—and nothing else. You belong with him."

As she was speaking she raised her gun, leveled it straight at him, and fired it.

Eddie had started toward her. He tried to cry out her name but the sound of the shot muffled what he said. A stabbing, blinding pain tore through his chest. This couldn't be happening. It was impossible. Lydia—Lydia—Lydia—

THE LATE



FRED!" yelled old man C. J. Hotchkiss. "Fred, bring me that file on the Dooley property!"

I'm Fred. J. Fred Leffingwell, assistant cashier of the People's Bank and Trust Company of Hawkinson. To look at me I suppose the majority of people would think—if they thought about me at all—that there goes an insig-

There is always something absurd in the spectacle of the eternal rake who refuses to grow old, whether gracefully or otherwise; absurd, and also rather pathetic, for in the last analysis, they, too, must make their peace with the inevitable.

nificant, colorless man. I've got no illusions about myself. At forty-six I have only a small halo of tannish hair, my eyes are magnified comically by the thick lenses I find it necessary to wear. My nose is a bizarre adornment concerning which I waged many a losing battle in my youth. Over my five foot four inch frame is distributed, more or less unevenly, a hundred and seventeen pounds. A fondness for beer has tended to concentrate this weight about the waistline so that my general silhouette is about that of a bowling pin.

But what is the physical man? It is the mind, the wit, the *psyche* that is the real man, and in this regard I, J. Fred Leffingwell—

"I want this file and I want it now, Leffingwell!" boomed the old man.

"I'm getting it, Mr. Hotchkiss." Now, that was an example of what I go through day after day. It's never 'Fred, would you please do this?' or 'Fred, would you mind getting that?'; it's always a command, always as imperious as Captain Bligh on the poopdeck.

As I was saying, though, I am really far from being the insignificant little fellow you see standing back of the bars of the assistant cashier window. Behind this outwardly diffident countenance burns

the brain of a classic roué, a veritable Cyprian who, but for the lack of means at his disposal would put Don Juan to shame.

I got the papers Mr. Hotchkiss wanted and took them over to his desk where I was rewarded with a hot glare. As I was going back to my cage I heard the toot of a horn in front of the bank and I looked out to see Uncle Fargo sitting behind the wheel of his flashy little foreign car, grinning and waving at me. Sitting beside him, as close as the bucket seats would permit, was a beautiful blonde whom I'd seen once or twice at Uncle Fargo's parties but whose name escaped me at the moment.

Now, there was a man who knew how to live! Fargo Leffingwell, the uncle I had idolized since my childhood. Uncle Fargo laughed in the face of convention, he went his merry way unfettered by conformity, revelling in the ways of the libertine. So-called polite society in Hawkins-ton would have none of Fargo Leffingwell, and Uncle Fargo, to their chagrin, looked on that as a compliment rather than a slight.

This isn't to say he was a wastrel. Not at all. He had a positive genius for doing the one thing that made possible all his other endeavors. Uncle Fargo

could make money. He had an absolute Midas touch without the drawbacks the good king ran into. Uncle Fargo was always flush, he drove only the finest automobiles, travelled extensively, smoked the most costly cigars, and drank scotch whiskey as though it came from the tap—but only if it was more than twenty years old. The young blonde, who could hardly have been much older than Uncle Fargo's beloved scotch whiskey, was evidence to the amazing fact that Uncle Fargo gave no concessions to time, for he was past seventy-five.

As I watched, Uncle Fargo leaned over and said something to the girl. She threw back her head and laughed, the rich contralto ringing enticingly in through the open door of the bank. The traffic light changed to green, and with another cavalier wave of his hand Uncle Fargo and his latest paramour roared away down Main Street.

"I swear, I think the old man's made a pact with the devil!"

I looked around and saw Cousin Fanny Leffingwell standing in the bank lobby. She, like most of us Leffingwells, was a mousy little creature, her face hardened by a life of flowing frustration. And, like the rest of us, this frustration was centered in our shining

hope, Uncle Fargo. It was a stark fact that Fargo Leffingwell represented our future. He had never married, thus he had no direct descendants. His blood kin consisted of eleven nieces and nephews, the offspring of his two brothers, both of whom had long since passed away. We—myself, Cousin Fanny, Cousin Elton, the twins Bart and Mart, in fact all eleven of us—were waiting for the avuncular departure from this vale of tears, leaving behind, of course, all his worldly goods. We were waiting as patiently as we could, but I'm sure they all felt as I did, that Uncle Fargo had somehow stumbled onto the secret to immortality.

Cousin Fanny turned to me. "Fred, you don't suppose he'll—he'll *marry* one of them, do you!"

I went around the corner of the counter and back into my cage. "He's past seventy-five, Fanny. He's been single this long, he'll stay single."

She edged over to the cage. "Fred. Fred, you're in financial things. How much do you think he's worth?"

I shuffled through some papers and shrugged my shoulders.

Cousin Fanny threw a glance around the bank and then leaned a little closer. "How much money does he have in the bank?" she

whispered, hand cupping mouth.

"For heaven's sake, Fanny! You know information like that is confidential. Now, if you've got any business in here, get on with it!"

What I didn't tell Cousin Fanny, of course, was that I watched Uncle Fargo's account like it was my own. I knew to the penny at all times what his balance was. It averaged somewhere in the neighborhood of ten thousand dollars, though this was simply Uncle Fargo's pocket money, so to speak. He owned a number of valuable parcels of real estate around town, in fact he owned the building that housed the bank where I worked. He also had half a dozen good farms scattered over a three county area. I had calculated Uncle Fargo's worth to be between two and three hundred thousand dollars. I had also—more than once—divided those sums by eleven. I was assuming in this that he would divide his estate equally among his living kin, which was a reasonable assumption as Uncle Fargo did not seem to favor any one of his nieces or nephews over any other.

Thus, I was counting on something like twenty-five thousand, give or take a couple of thousand. I was counting on it very hard. Though I was extremely fond of Uncle Fargo, I must in all honesty

admit I was looking forward to his funeral with the same anticipation I had felt as a child for the annual visit of Santa Claus.

My business career had reached its apogee. In the bank there were two people over me. Old man C. J. Hotchkiss, the president, and his son Abner, vice-president and cashier. Just below me, prepared to step around me when the time came, stood young C. J. II, Abner's boy. So, boxed in as I was by Hotchkisses I knew well enough that assistant cashier was the highest title I'd ever see before my name. A pencil and paper and five minutes time and I could figure the total income for the entire remainder of my working life. Needless to say, it was hardly sufficient to carry out my dreams of emulating my Uncle Fargo.

There was one thing of Uncle Fargo's that held particular interest for me, and that was his safe deposit box in the bank. I suppose it was simply a matter of propinquity that fostered this curiosity, but it had existed ever since Uncle Fargo engaged the box four years before. To my knowledge, since I am in charge of the safe deposit boxes in addition to my other duties, Uncle Fargo had never sought access to his box since that first day. In it perhaps were stock certificates,

savings bonds, deeds to his various holdings, life insurance policies, and the like. Still, it held the mystery associated with the unknown, and I often found myself glancing at the locked compartment whenever my work took me into the vault.

This more or less dormant interest bore fruit through a curious mating of events. It was on a Friday just before closing time. Uncle Fargo dropped by the bank and asked me to come out and have supper with him. It was obvious that he'd already had more than a few shots of his scotch whiskey and he was in his usual high spirits. I told him I'd be out as soon as I finished work.

Uncle Fargo's place was out on the river, a low rambling ranch-style house at the end of a long winding drive. When I pulled up behind his sports car in my eight year old sedan I heard the strains of *Gaité Parisienne* blaring from the stereo set inside the house. It was music that fitted Uncle Fargo perfectly. You could almost see the nymphs flinging themselves about in the *Can-Can*, with the old satyr himself, Uncle Fargo, gyrating around with them and laughing boisterously at the top of his lungs.

"Come on in, Fred!" he called from the front door. "I thought

me and you would just have a peaceful evening together listening to a few records and drinking a little whiskey!"

I grinned back at him. "Slowing down, Uncle Fargo?"

That got a big laugh from him. "No such luck, nephew! You buzzards got a long wait before you pick these old bones!" He clapped me on the shoulder. "Meantime, you can't say your Uncle Fargo's stingy, can you?"

What he said was certainly true. Whatever else could be attributed to Uncle Fargo, no one could ever accuse him of being tight-fisted. His door was always open, and inside the house nothing was held back. At Uncle Fargo's I could assume the temporary status of the epicurean. The trouble was, all too soon I'd find myself back in my own miserable flat on Murphy Street, and the bitterness of accepting myself as I was then became all too palpable.

Uncle Fargo charcoaled a couple of steaks for us and regaled me with tales of his travels. After we ate he broke out another bottle of scotch and we sat out on the verandah and watched the river meander past. By eight-thirty Uncle Fargo was slouched back in his chair, snoring.

The thing I did then was somewhat impulsive, though it was

probably prompted in some measure by the scotch whiskey. I began to prowl through Uncle Fargo's house, and it was in that way that I came upon the key to Uncle Fargo's mysterious safe deposit box. The key was tucked away in the back of a drawer in his desk, and judging by its location and the accumulation of old papers over it Uncle Fargo had no immediate plans for its use.

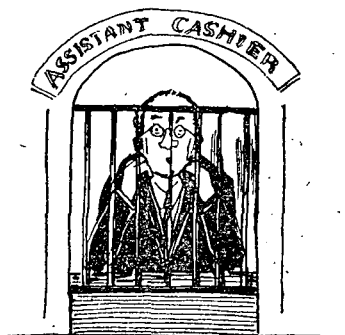
At this point my sole motivation was curiosity. It occurred to me that with this key it would be a simple matter for me to have a peek in the box. As you probably know, a safe deposit box in a bank requires the use of two keys, one in the possession of the boxholder and the other kept by the bank itself. As the officer in charge of the safe deposit department, I could use both keys. I could get my look in the box and the next time I was at Uncle Fargo's house I could slip the key back into the desk drawer.

And so I dropped the key into my pocket, and then I went out and roused Uncle Fargo sufficiently to get him to his bedroom, after which I drove back to my flat.

Monday morning I waited for my chance. When a moment arrived during which all the Hotchkisses were busy and Miss Eudo-

cia Landry, the teller, was waiting on a customer, I slipped into the vault, glanced once over my shoulder, and using the two keys opened Uncle Fargo's box.

Well, you can believe me when I say that what greeted my eyes inside positively made my remaining hair stand on end. The box was neatly packed, top to bottom,



side to side, front to back with tightly wrapped packets of *currency*! All hundreds and fifties! With the practiced eye of a banker I made a quick estimate. Assuming the bills underneath the top layer to be the same denominations, there was upwards of half a million dollars there before me! *Half a million—*

A footstep sounded just outside the vault and I pushed the box shut and extracted the keys just as Abner Hotchkiss stepped inside the vault. "Fred, have you seen that credit report on Roy Ingram? It was on my desk."

I dropped the keys into my pocket. "Have I seen . . . what . . . ?" I was still seeing the amazing inside of Uncle Fargo's deposit box, everywhere I looked. Subconsciously, I found myself already dividing five hundred thousand by eleven.

"—credit report on Ingram. What's the matter, Fred, are you ill? You look a little pasty."

Why did there have to be so damned many Leffingwells! A regular plethora of them!

"I don't think you've heard one word I said, Leffingwell!"

But wait! Why did this have to be divided? Things such as bank accounts and real estate would have to be split up, but did the contents of that deposit box? Wasn't there a way? My hand was still in my pocket and I rubbed the two keys together slowly. The box was virtually a secret. Uncle Fargo knew of it, I knew of it, and there was a card in the file that showed he had engaged the box. Once each year he paid me his rental on it, and he paid in cash. Removing all paperwork pertaining to it from the bank files would be a relatively simple task.

"Look here, Fred!" said Abner Hotchkiss. "Have you been drinking? You act like you've been drinking! You know Dad sim-

ply will not stand for that—"

I pushed past him and went back to my cage and leaned my elbows on the counter. If I got rid of the registration card and the payment credit slips, then the only records remaining lay inscribed in my brain and in Uncle Fargo's.

"Dad! Dad!" I heard Abner Hotchkiss calling. And it was at that very instant that the thought of murder came to me.

There it was, as logical and as innocent as you please. Murder. Probably the most uncompromising word in the whole language, standing alone and apart. But perhaps even harsher is the word *murderer*, and that would be the stamp I'd bear. Not being an insensitive person, this pained me.

However, as I said previously, there was logic in this thing. First off, if I didn't do something about it I would only get the eleventh part of this money on Uncle Fargo's death. Secondly, it was conceivable that Uncle Fargo, seemingly indestructible, might spend part or even all of it before he died. And thirdly, I was getting no younger myself, and if I was to enjoy wealth I would have to hurry up and get wealthy.

You realize by this time that I bore not the slightest ill will to-

ward Uncle Fargo. Of course, my first responsibility would have to be to myself. Precautions would have to be taken to insure that his death was not pinned on me. But after that consideration was looked after I most certainly intended making this whole thing as easy and painless as was humanly possible for Uncle Fargo.

On my way home that evening I stopped off at the delicatessen down the street from my flat and bought some cold cuts. After that I went to the liquor store next door and got myself a bottle of blend, and then I went to my room to finalize my plan.

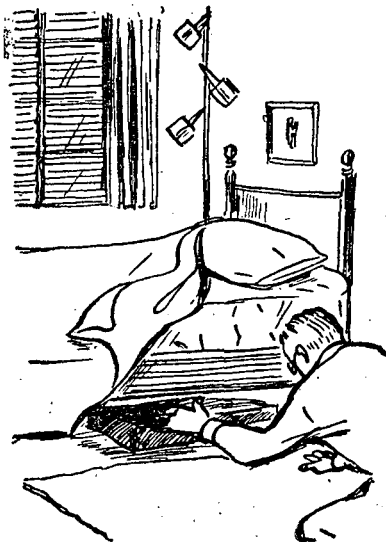
I put the first phase into operation the following day. I began by removing the money from Uncle

Fargo's box. This I did by taking a little at a time. As it turned out, much to my delight, my original estimate had been on the low side. In the box were seventy packets of strapped bills. Fifty of them were hundreds, each packet containing a hundred bills, or ten thousand dollars. The remaining twenty packets were fifties, of five thousand dollars each, for a grand total of six hundred thousand dollars. I took them from the vault ten packs at a time, the bills stuffed down inside my belt and hidden by my coat. Once out of the vault I secreted the money in a drawer in my cage, a drawer which was never looked into except by myself. Over a period of two days (exercising the utmost in caution) I removed the money to my car and thence to my apartment, where I placed it all in a carton which I kept beneath my bed.

This was finished, then, on Tuesday. Next I methodically destroyed all paperwork that might give a clue to Uncle Fargo's having rented the deposit box, and now that left just one thing to carry the plan to completion.

I had to kill Uncle Fargo.

Surprisingly, murder is a childishly simple thing when given sufficient thought. By this I don't imply a great deal of brooding



over an extended time, but merely the straightforward approach of a fresh and inspired mind.

Uncle Fargo was crazy about sports cars. Uncle Fargo was more than seventy-five years old. *Ergo*, a fatal sports car crash involving Uncle Fargo would hardly be likely to excite suspicion.

I phoned him on Thursday and told him I'd like to drop by his house after work if he was alone. I intimated that I needed his advice on something. Affable as always, he said to come out whenever I wanted.

He met me at the door, his usual highball glass clutched in his right hand.

"What is it, Freddie-boy?" he began, then he nudged me with his elbow and chuckled, "You ain't in trouble with that little teller down there at the bank, are you!"

I walked across the living room to the fireplace and idly picked up the poker from the little stand beneath the mantle. "No, Uncle Fargo, that's not exactly what it . . ." I turned back and faced him. He was standing only a few feet from me. He lifted his glass and took a deep swallow, waiting. He didn't have long to wait. With a quick motion I raised the poker and brought it around in a short arc, catching Uncle Fargo a glanc-

ing-blow on the temple. The highball glass fell to the floor, crashing, and Uncle Fargo followed it. His hand went to his head and his eyes, glazed with pain and amazement, were still on my face.

"Fred . . . what . . ." he said weakly.

"Money, Uncle Fargo." I lifted the poker again and stood over him. "Believe me, I hate to do this. I really do."

I brought it down hard and true this time.

I drove Uncle Fargo's sports car out onto the long driveway, aimed it in the direction of a grove of sturdy oaks just off the drive, engaged the gear, pulled the hand throttle all the way out, and jumped clear. It was a spectacular crash, and when I installed Uncle Fargo's body in the wreckage it presented a tableau that could hardly be questioned. When I was completely satisfied as to its appearance of authenticity, I returned to the house, cleaned up the mess of the broken highball glass, washed all traces of blood from the poker, and called the police to tell them what I had found upon paying a social visit to my uncle.

In all honesty, I must admit I didn't feel too well by the time I

got to my flat that evening. Uncle Fargo's death went alright, by that I mean there were no unexpected questions nor any suspicion evinced on the part of the police, at least not outwardly. Perhaps it was conscience I felt. I could recall too well that grinning, elfin face of his, the hearty handshake, the generosity, the delight over a new joke, the real *joie de vivre* that so characterized the late Fargo Leffingwell.

But I had what I set out for. I locked the door of my flat and took the box from beneath the bed and once again counted the money. Before I was half finished with the counting I was much improved and by the time I was done I felt positively exhilarated. There before me was my life's dream. There were expensive cars, beautiful women, a sleek cabin cruiser, perhaps even my own airplane. There were trips to exotic places I had only read about, Europe, the Caribbean, Hawaii, the *Cote d'Azur*, Rio . . .

Oh, I would have to exercise care in what I did. Of course, one eleventh of Uncle Fargo's estate would also come to me, but that would not be sufficiently large to explain the extravagances I intended lavishing upon myself.

I looked around the miserable flat and I laughed. A few more

days and I would be out of this rat hole forever. I slid the box of money back beneath the bed and reached into my pocket for cigarettes. I extracted the pack only to find that it was empty. Likewise, there were none in the kitchenette drawer. I decided to go down to the delicatessen and get cigarettes and something for my dinner, but first I needed a drink.

The bottle of cheap blend was on the kitchen shelf. I took it down and started to pour myself a shot into a glass, but then I looked at the bottle, smiled, and upended it over the sink letting the entire contents gurgle out and down the drain. A man of means does not drink rotgut.

I pulled the box back out and took one bill from it, and then I went downstairs to the delicatessen. Mr. Gold greeted me in friendly fashion and sliced a half pound of pastrami for me. I also bought a loaf of rye bread and a few other items and when he had the order prepared I gave him the money.

He turned the hundred dollar bill this way and that and grinned at me. "The bank give you a raise, Fred?"

I hadn't anticipated his paying any particular attention to the bill, and for an instant I experienced a

sudden feeling of fear. Flustered, I said something about winning a bet. He made change and I left the store with my purchases. I made one more stop on my way back to the flat. I went into the liquor store and I bought a fifth of the finest, oldest, most expensive scotch whiskey in the place.

The good life had begun. I walked back to my apartment on winged feet.

I stepped up to Mr. C. J. Hotchkiss' desk the very first thing the following morning. "I am tendering my resignation, effective immediately," I said.

He stared at me as though his hearing had suddenly gone bad. "Eh? What was that, Leffingwell?"

"I said, I quit." I turned to go.

"Hold on there! Come back here, Leffingwell!"

I looked back at the old man. "Yes?"

"You can't just—just *quit*!" he spluttered.

"Oh, but I already have," I smiled.

"What the devil is this!" A crafty gleam suddenly came into his eye. "Well, I think I see! It's that business about Fargo getting himself killed yesterday, is it? You're one of his heirs, eh? You

think you can just retire now, perhaps be a man like your uncle was? I wouldn't do anything rash if I were you, Leffingwell. I'd give this some thought. Remember, I won't have you crawling back here for your job after you spend your little windfall. Don't come here begging for your job because it won't be here!"

I stepped back to his desk and I reached out and did something I had been wanting to do for twenty-seven years. I tweaked Mr. Hotchkiss' nose.

"That for you and your job!"

Oh, the bliss of wealth! The ineffable beauty of being able to thumb your nose at whomever you like!

I drove back to Murphy Street and climbed the stairs to my flat, thinking of the smoky taste of the scotch whiskey that awaited me. I thought to myself, it's spring now in Rio. Palm trees waving, azure waters gently rippling, hula girls going to and fro, to and fro . . . no, that was Hawaii. Well, I'd go there too! I'd become a regular cosmopolite!

When I reached my door I saw a stranger standing a ways down the hall. I looked the other way. There was a man there also. A twinge of fear caught at my

throat. In my mind the word *Robbery!* flashed urgently.

But that was absurd. Who could possibly know of the money beneath the bed, and why else would anyone want to rob a poor man such as I?

I relaxed, chiding myself for being so unreasonably fearful. I put the key in the lock and as if that were a signal the man on my left stepped forward.

"Mr. Leffingwell?" he said in a well modulated voice.

A salesman? Certainly not a bill collector with that polite manner.

"Yes, I'm Leffingwell," I said with all the brusqueness I could summon.

He flipped open a leather folder and I caught a fleeting glimpse of a badge and identification card before he put it back in his pocket. "FBI," he said.

The second man had moved up beside me and now he said, "Did you spend a hundred dollar bill in the delicatessen down the street yesterday?"

"I . . . say, what is this?"

"The owner of the delicatessen says you were the only customer

yesterday who gave him a bill of that particular denomination."

"Alright. I gave him a hundred dollar bill. So what?"

The first agent smiled without humor. "We've been waiting four years for one of these bills to turn up. Do you mind telling us where you got it?"

Perspiration, icy, clammy perspiration was trickling down my back. "I . . . don't remember . . . I have to go now . . ."

He reached into the inside of his coat and for a second I thought he was going to pull a gun and shoot me. "We'll have to take a look around your apartment. I have a search warrant here, Mr. Leffingwell. This bill was one of those taken in the robbery of the Bank Express in Atlanta four years ago."

In my mind a very vivid vision of Rio was fading, and in its place there came a vague region that seemed to smell of smoke and burning sulphur. In the midst of it, with a little pitchfork in one hand and a highball glass in the other, was Uncle Fargo.

He was doubled up, laughing.



The title of this tale may be somewhat misleading, for it does not have to do with the Alice In Wonderland or Through The Looking-Glass sort of fare, but with another menu entirely. It may be less interesting than Alice's, or less intriguing, but the results are equally astonishing.

IT'S MY BELIEF that the sausage is one of the noblest inventions of mankind," Henry Chandler said. "And presented in the form of a

sandwich, it is not only nourishing, but also so practical. One can conduct the process of eating without undue preoccupation. One may read, or watch, or hold a gun."

He held a .38 Colt in his right hand.

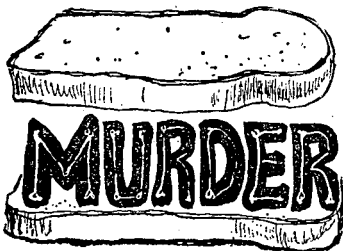
On the wall, the electric clock showed fifteen minutes after twelve noon, and except for Chandler and me, the offices were empty.

He bit into the sandwich, he chewed, and he swallowed. Then he smiled. "You and my wife were discreet, Mr. Davis. Exceptionally discreet, and that now works to my advantage. I will, of course, arrange matters to make it appear that you have taken your own life.

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BY JACK
RITCHIE



A TASTE FOR MURDER



But should the police not be deceived and decide a murder has been committed, they will still be at a loss for a motive. There is nothing obvious to link you and me beyond the fact that you employ me . . . and twenty others."

I placed my cold fingers on the desk top. "Your wife will know. She'll go to the police."

"Really? I doubt it. A woman may do a great deal for her lover . . . when he is alive. But once he is dead, it is another matter. Women are intensely practical, Mr. Davis. And there is the fact that she will only *suspect* that I may have murdered you. She will not *know*. And this uncertainty, if nothing else, will prevent her from going to the police. She will tell herself, quite reasonably, that there is no reason to bring her affair with you into the open. Perhaps there are dozens of people besides me who might want you dead."

Desperation was apparent in my voice. "The police will check on everyone. They'll discover that you stayed up here after the others left."

He shook his head. "I don't think so. No one knows I'm here. I left when the others did, but I returned when I knew you were alone." He chewed for a moment or two. "I decided that it would be wisest to kill you during the lunch

period, Mr. Davis. That is the time in which the police would have the most difficult time in placing anyone. People eat, they wander about, or shop, and eventually they return to their work. It is almost impossible to verify . . . or disprove . . . where they claim to have been."

He reached into the brown paper bag again. "Ordinarily I eat in any of the number of cafeterias in this neighborhood. But I am not the type who is noticed—or missed. For two weeks, Mr. Davis, I have been waiting for you to linger after the others left." He smiled. "And then this morning I noticed that you brought your lunch to the office. Did you decide that you would be too busy to go out and eat?"

I licked my lips. "Yes."

He raised the top half of the sandwich and peered at the two small sausages. "The human body reacts in peculiar ways. I understand that in moments of stress—grief, fear, anger—it often responds with hunger. And at this moment, Mr. Davis, I find myself ravenously hungry." He smiled. "Are you positive you wouldn't care for a sandwich? After all, they are yours."

I said nothing.

He wiped his lips with a paper napkin. "In his present state of

evolution, man still requires meat. However from the point of view of one with my sensitivity, there are certain obstacles to enjoying its consumption. When I am presented with a steak, for instance, I approach it timidly. Did you know that should I bite into just one morsel of gristle, I am immediately so shattered that I cannot finish the meal?"

He studied me. "Perhaps you think that I am a bit hysterical to be discussing food at a time like this?" Then he nodded almost to himself. "I don't know why I don't shoot you this instant. Is it because I enjoy these moments and wish to prolong them? Or is it because I really dread the final act?" He shrugged. "But even if I *do* dread it, let me assure you that I have every intention of going through with this."

I took my eyes off the paper bag and reached for the pack of cigarettes on my desk. "Do you know where Helen is now?"

"Did you want to say goodbye? Or try to have her persuade me not to do this? I'm sorry I can't arrange that, Mr. Davis. Helen left on Thursday to spend a week with her sister."

I lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "I have no regrets about dying. I think I'm quite even with the world and the people in it."

He tilted his head slightly, not understanding.

"It's happened three times," I said. "Three times. Before Helen there was Beatrice, and before Beatrice there was Dorothy."

He smiled suddenly. "Are you talking to gain time? But that will do you no actual good, Mr. Davis. I have locked the outer doors to the corridor. Should anyone return before one o'clock—which I doubt—he cannot enter. And if he is persistent and knocks, I will merely shoot you and leave by the back way."

My fingertips left wet marks on the desk top. "Love and hate are close, Chandler. Especially with me. When I love—or hate—I do it intensely."

I stared at my cigarette. "I loved Dorothy and I was certain that she loved me. We would be married: I had planned upon it. I had *expected* it. But at the last moment, she told me that she didn't love me. That she never had."

Chandler smiled and bit into the sandwich.

I listened for a moment to the street traffic outside. "I couldn't have her, but no one else could either." I looked at Chandler. "I killed her."

He blinked and stared at me. "Why are you telling me this?"

"What difference does it make

now?" I dragged on the cigarette. "I killed her, but that wasn't *enough*. Do you understand, Chandler? It wasn't *enough*. I hated her. *Hated* her."

I ground out the cigarette and spoke quietly. "I bought a knife and a hacksaw. And when I was through I weighted the bag with stones and I dropped the pieces into the river."

Chandler's face had paled.

I glared at the butt in the ash-tray. "And two years later I met Beatrice. She was married, but we went out together. For six months. I thought that she loved me as I loved her. But when I asked her to divorce her husband . . . to come with me . . . she laughed. She *laughed*."

Chandler had backed away a step.

I could feel perspiration on my face. "This time the hacksaw and the knife weren't enough. That wouldn't satisfy me." I leaned forward. "It was night when I took the bag to the animals. Moonlight. And I watched as they growled and tore and waited at the bars for more."

Chandler's eyes were wide.

I got up slowly. I touched the sandwich he had left on my desk and lifted up the top slice of bread. Then I smiled. "Pork casings come packed in salt, Chandler. Did you

know that? In a little round carton. Fifty feet of casings for eighty-eight cents."

I put the slice of bread back in place. "Did you know that a sausage stuffer costs thirty-five dollars?"

I stared past him and smiled. "First you bone the meat and then you cut it into convenient sized pieces. The lean, the fat, the gristle."

I met his eyes. "Your wife would not leave you, Chandler. She had been toying with me. I loved her and I hated her. More than I had ever hated anyone in the world. And I remembered the cats and how much they had enjoyed every . . .

I looked into Chandler's horror-filled eyes. "Where do you think Helen *really* is now?"

And then I extended the half-eaten sandwich towards him.

After the funeral, I helped Helen back to the car. When we were alone, she turned to me. "I'm positive Henry didn't know anything about us. I just can't understand why he should kill himself, and in your office."

I drove out of the cemetery gates and smiled. "I don't know. Maybe it was something he ate."

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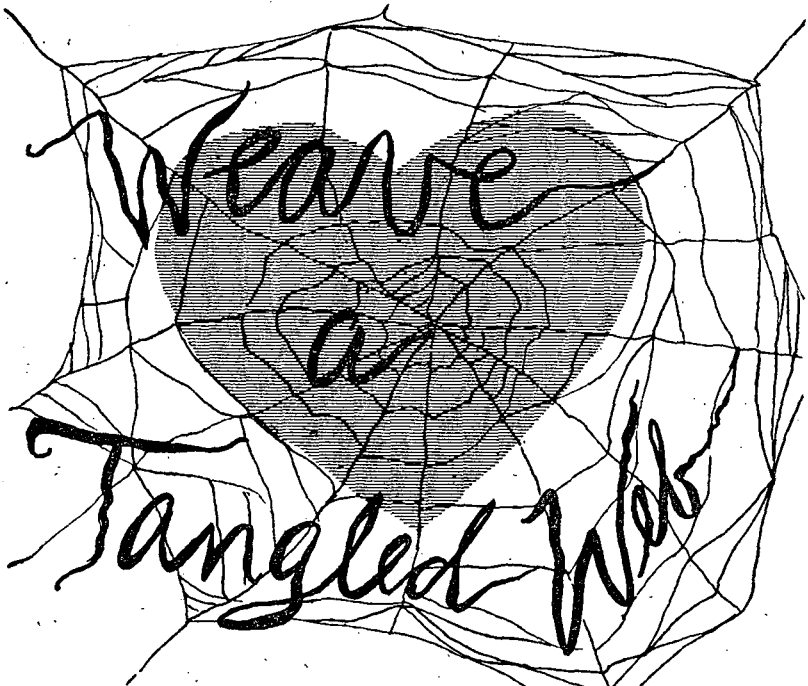
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FOR a start, you might say it all came about because Peter Peabody inherited \$50,000.00 from a dog. Not that the dog actually sat down with his attorneys and personally willed the money to Peter Peabody—a—not inconsiderable sum even in these inflationary times. This is not a shaggy dog

By
A.Y. Friedman

story. And Ch. Baldur von und zu Pirogen was not a shaggy dog. He was a Spitz with a lineage and a fur as fine as generations of careful breeding could produce.

I have always wondered, as I am sure you have, too, what motivates those legacies of money left to so-called dumb animals. Of course usually one of the higher, or not-so-dumb animal's otherwise known as humans, takes charge of the legacy, quite legally, for the most part.

Yes, you might say this was the start. But, of course, you would be wrong. What happened between Peter and Pandora and Nick had its beginnings much farther back. Back when Peter married Pandora. Back when Peter and Nick sat out the war on the island of Bora-Hiva, for reasons best known to some people who sat out the war at the Pentagon. It was on Bora-Hiva that Nick and Peter had themselves tattooed. Pandora didn't acquire hers until the war was over and they were back home.

Peter was alone in the studio behind the store, when the lawyer representing the estate of the late Mrs. Mortimer Uppercu brought him the news. While Peter was trying to recover—it wasn't every day that someone walked in off the street bearing wealth in his hands from a dog by way of a deceased society matron—the man looked about curiously at Peter and the examples of his art. Peter, on the surface required one glance. Medium height, medium features, and a medium, middle-aged stoop. His art required considerably more. From the leopard in the window, staring stonily through basilisk eyes at the passing world, as represented by the little street in the Village, to the brilliant macaw, forever perched in its

make-believe tree, they were all about.

Peter Peabody's art was, to say the least, a bit unusual. In a way, it was easier to say what he was not, rather than put a name to what he was. Despite the evidence of the leopard and the macaw, he was not a taxidermist. You couldn't call him a tanner, or a cabinet maker, or upholsterer, although certainly all these skills entered into it. Peter took your favorite animal, pet or trophy, and gave it back to you in somewhat altered form.

A tiger, driven from its bucolic jungle lair by a horde of clamoring beaters, and blasted from the safety of a padded fortress athwart



an elephant, became a sofa where you could take your ease while you lied about the dangers of the hunt. A favorite Siamese cat loaned its silky pelt to form the top of a foot stool. A snuffling Pekingese might come back to you as a purse, sans snuffles and nervous breakdowns.

The departed Baldur von und zu Pirogen—Boopsy to his adoring mistress—had served to ease the pain of his demise by reappearing in the guise of a toque and muff. The garments had attracted no little attention and comment—mostly favorable—in the circles where Mrs. Upperpu was wont to reign as dowager queen. The unfavorable emanated mainly from the person of Mrs. Trompelder-Blair, self-appointed heir and pretender to the throne, who saw her pretensions shattered by her rival's smashing coup de main. In addition, they had served to start a fad. A fad which bolstered Mrs. Upperpu's ego—which needed bolstering as much as the Medusa needed a set of Spanish combs—and radically shortened the life expectations of some assorted cats and dogs. The bequest was a small token of her gratitude.

While Peter Peabody wrestled with the notion of his newly acquired affluence, Pandora, his wife, was wrestling with a problem of her own. Pandora was

about to celebrate—if that is the proper term for a dirge—her fortieth birthday. This was by no means a sudden event, nor even a sudden problem. It had been coming on for better than thirty nine years. And for better than thirty nine years, Pandora Peabody had successfully hidden the soul of a vixen behind the face of a bisque angel. Of late, however, a certain grossness had begun to manifest itself; a sagging muscle here, a blurred line there. With perfect feminine logic, Pandora blamed this on Peter. Other women were given the money to take care of themselves. Other women had husbands who worried about their appearance. She had a husband who worried about beasts. Each wrinkle became a tally to add to the score; every crow's foot a treasure to hoard.

Peter Peabody sat at his meals with a woman who wished devoutly that each bite would stick crosswise in his gullet, so she could have the pleasure of watching him choke to death. He slept in a bed with a mate who spent half her nights listening to him breathe and praying that each succeeding inhalation might be his last. On the whole, it could not be classed as a particularly happy marriage.

Pandora Peabody's first reaction

to the news Peter brought home was a complete, utter and determined lack of belief. Nothing like this could ever happen to her. To other women—to mousy little females too scared to respond to the pulses surging in their own veins—yes; but never to her. Her second reaction, when Peter did finally breach the wall of her distrust, was equally determined. This money would be her means to salvation, and nothing Peter or anybody else could do about it would stop her.

Nick Kingdon, when Pandora told him about it, experienced no difficulty in believing. In Nick's personal book, all life was dependent on the breaks anyway; you got them and hit the jackpot, or you didn't and you were dead. There was nothing much you could do about matters, except to keep hoping.

Nick was Peter's best and only friend and had been, ever since their days together on Bora-Hiva. It was Nick who shared the tattoo Peter had conceived. The tattoo and Pandora.

Pandora wasted no time, even though they both knew the evening and most of the night was theirs. Peter was back around the corner at the studio behind the store and would be for hours. Nick watched Pandora with ad-

miration. She looked alive. Vital. There was a verve and a spirit in her he hadn't seen for years. He felt himself respond.

"I'm getting that money," she said. "It's mine for all the years I've lived with him. For all the years I've cooked for him, and cleaned for him, and slept with him, and played understudy to a pack of dead animals. It's mine. And I'm going to get it." She stared directly into his eyes. "And you're going to help me."

Nick took his time about answering. He made a ritual out of extracting a cigaret and lighting it. "How?" he asked finally. "I'm no killer, you know. The sight of blood always upsets me."

She snorted. The sound came strangely from that angelic face. "I want the money so I can live to enjoy it. Not to warm me in the death-house and build me a monument after I'm gone."

"Just how do you intend working this miracle?"

"Love."

"Now, really!" Nick exclaimed. "I've often heard the tender passion wields a great deal of power. But to expect a man to hand over \$50,000.00 for no better reason—and to his own wife, no less—are-n't you asking just a little too much from the God with the bow and arrows?"

"I don't think you understand."

"You're right. I don't."

"I haven't exactly been the sort of wife Peter wanted."

Nick nodded. "Agreed."

"That's all changed now," Pandora said. "From here on in, Peter is going to have every reason to love me."

Nick blew a smoke ring and followed its course until it dissipated. "And this will cause him to present you with all those lovely greenbacks?"

"These days, any time a man manages to acquire even one loose dollar there are millions of grasping fingers only too eager to snatch it away from him."

"True," Nick murmured.

"People will sue for any or no reason. They'll stage falls and even break legs or arms. Anything to get some of the money."

"I seem to have heard something of the sort."

"What's so unusual about a man trusting his wife to safeguard all they own, by placing everything under her name? A wife who is solely devoted to his welfare and concerned only with him? It's done every day, and by business men who are accustomed to dealing with facts, not dreamers with a ridiculous studio on a side street."

"And you intend becoming this

paragon?" Nick asked in doubt.

"Watch me," Pandora said.

"And while you're portraying the good and faithful helpmate, what part am I supposed to play—help boost you up on your pedestal and make sure the whole rickety structure doesn't collapse?"

"Exactly," Pandora said. "You're Peter's friend. He believes in you."

She waited confidently for Nick's answer. Nick wouldn't fail her. Not now. True, the whole scheme was a bit rickety and, without Nick to lend a hand, might require considerable shoring up. But when you came right down to it, the reward certainly outweighed the risk. And it was only Peter they had to deal with. With Nick, or without him, she was going through with it.

Nick took his own placid time about answering. The proposition was inviting and the size of the sum involved certainly made it attractive. But Pandora underrated Peter. He might be a dreamer but he was not an utter and complete fool. Still, this could well be the break he had been waiting for all his life.

"In words of one syllable, my dear—what's in it for me?"

Pandora answered by putting her arms around him and clamping her mouth to his. The kiss was long and intense and when

they finally separated, they were both visibly shaken.

"That's a very potent argument you have there," Nick said.

"It's always been you," Pandora said. "From the very first time Peter brought you home, there's never really been anyone else. "Oh," she shrugged her shoulders, "I might have experimented now and then—I'm human and curious, and you weren't always around when I needed you and wanted you—but you've always been my man."

"We do seem to make a pair," Nick said. "I haven't quite been faithful old dog Tray, myself, but somehow—none of them could ever substitute for you. Come what may, I'm afraid we're stuck with each other."

"Once we get the money, we'll go away together," Pandora said. "Far away. Where nobody will ever think of doing anything with a dead animal but decently burying it. And then, at last, we can both learn to live a little."

"There is one more thing," Nick said. He extended his hand and gently touched her just over her heart.

"Don't do that!" Pandora exploded. "I hate it! I only permitted myself to be disfigured because of you."

"Because of me?" Nick repeated

after her. "But the tattoo wasn't my idea; it was all Peter's. You knew that."

"I know," Pandora said. "The gossamer strands of the webs over our hearts," she quoted, "will serve to entangle us forever in the bonds of friendship and love. As the lonely spider faithfully spins its web to ensnare its prey, so shall our hearts be snared together for always," she finished the quotation. "Who but Peter," she said, "would use a lousy spider's web as a symbol of fidelity?"

"Lousy or not," Nick said, "we three wear a common sign. And Peter, for one, takes it seriously."

"I told you why I had that damned web tattooed over my heart—why did you?"

"It was a long war," Nick remembered back. "And the island of Borva-Hiva was such a tiny island. There was nothing to do. Nothing, that is, except to try and brew up some rot-gut and gamble. The rot-gut cost money and my luck with the cards and dice, as usual, was out." He went on. "Peter was different. He didn't drink or gamble."

"Peter," Pandora said, "has no vices. He doesn't drink or gamble or smoke or chew. He just sits there and fashions his furred and feathered subjects into shapes nature never dreamed of, and thinks

up new and interesting ways to neglect his wife."

Nick ignored her remarks. He was still too busy remembering.

"Peter wasn't very popular. He made it pretty clear he considered the rest of us a waste of time. Mostly, he was busy slicing up anything the natives would bring him. I think he really learned his trade there. We bunked together and somehow, I fell into the habit of keeping the others off his back."

"Peter always finds a way to use people to his advantage."

"In justice to Peter," Nick said, "it wasn't all one-sided. I was always strapped. You know me; money takes one look at me and runs off and hides. But not Peter. The others may have considered him a good deal of an odd-ball, and fair game for what passed for humor, but they grabbed anything he made and paid plenty. And he was very generous. It made it very handy—bunking with my banker."

"The only sums I ever received from generous Peter, were my regular monthly allotments," Pandora said bitterly. "Not a dime, not a nickel, not even a penny more. He was saving for our future, he wrote me. OUR future."

"The natives did some beautiful tattooing. Tribal taboos and puberty rites, all that sort of thing.

In no time, everybody blossomed out. Mostly hearts with love to mother, or wreaths, and an occasional mermaid to break up the monotony—although the natives' ideas about mermaid anatomy were something fearful to behold. So when Peter suggested we have the webs tattooed over our hearts, as a symbol of friendship, I wasn't at all inclined to disagree. As a matter of fact, I was rather proud of them. If nothing else, they were certainly unique."

"And so," Pandora continued for him, "the war finally ended, even on Bora-Hiva, and you and Peter came home. And I looked at you, and nothing else would do, but I must have a web over my heart, too."

"You weren't the only one who looked," Nick said. "Who would ever have thought a stick like Peter would be married to someone like you."

"How many times I've regretted it," Pandora said. "Times I've seen faces change and known what they were staring at."

"I hadn't realized you were giving public exhibitions," Nick said.

"Oh, Nick, stop it," Pandora said. "We are what we are, and both of us know it. It's perfectly alright to fool Peter, but let's at least try to be honest with each other."

Nick raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Honest it is," he said. "When does the campaign to defraud Peter begin?"

"Right now," Pandora said, "Good night."

"Good night?" Nick cocked an eyebrow at her. "I had thought we'd seal our bargain with—uh—well—a pleasant interlude."

"No interludes," Pandora announced. "Until this is over, and you and I are home free, we're merely good friends. We're not risking everything for any interludes—pleasant though they may be. I'm stepping around the corner to keep Peter company. The poor man must be lonesome with nothing around but carcasses."

Nick leaned over and kissed Pandora chastely on the forehead. "Be careful," he murmured. "Peter may not be quite as stupid as you think. And the webs do mean a good deal to him."

Pandora felt herself oddly moved by the chaste kiss. "Trust me," she answered. "We'll have our chance for some happiness, yet."

And so it was that Peter Peabody discovered that in addition to a totally unexpected inheritance, he had gained a wife.

Where previously, Pandora had always been bored, or tired, she had suddenly become eager to an-

ticipate his least desire. On the table, in place of tired hamburgers and greasy chops, Peter found himself assailed by a series of dainty little concoctions straight out of the pages of some of the gayer magazines devoted to the female libido.

The hours in the studio behind the store, where the actual transformations took place, were enlivened by the presence of Pandora, a Pandora who admired every step of what was, after all, a rather grisly process, and who made little of traipsing up and back with trays of sandwiches with their crusts carefully removed and fillings which resembled nationally advertised toothpastes. All this to the mute dismay of Peter, who preferred his sandwiches with their crusts decently in place and fillings which sank to the pit of a man's stomach and stayed there. Peter's art was no sport for the dilettante. It required work and plenty of it.

Nick, meanwhile, warily maintained his end of the bargain. He acted the part of the staunch family friend, with no hint of interludes, pleasant or otherwise, to mar his role. It was Nick who approached Peter with the idea of transferring title to the money to Pandora—for Peter's own best interests, of course. This was at Pan-

dora's insistence, as part of her plan, and not without some qualms on his side. Nick was a man who much preferred letting events happen all by themselves.

In the end, in the face of all of Nick's fears, it proved remarkably easy. Peter, when the suggestion was broached to him, was not only amenable but downright enthusiastic. If Pandora was willing to play watchdog and guard their treasure, it was more than alright with him. So far as he was concerned, anything which diverted his time and thoughts from his work was a burden, not a blessing.

It was Peter who escorted Pandora to the bank when the check came and supervised the deposit of the entire sum to her personal account. And it was Peter who arranged the little celebration which

followed and proposed the toast to the three of them. In a way, the scene, for two of the three, was reminiscent of a lamb taking his butchers by the hands and gaily helping them lead him to his slaughter.

Pandora waited two whole weeks, to make certain the check had cleared all possible hurdles, before going back to the bank and closing the account. It was not an easy fortnight. The knowledge that her release was only a signature away, compounded with a trickster's natural contempt for his gull, called for superb control. Maintaining her pose was something which had to be done, and she did it. Peter still had an affectionate wife for the entire period.

The teller recognized her and was very helpful. He was deeply



apologetic because her signature had to be verified by the vice-president in charge of the branch. This required him to disappear for some moments and caused Pandora to mutter a few dozen well-chosen words to herself. The bills, when she finally got them in hand and safely home, made a neat packet. They communicated the feeling of sheer luxury commonly exhibited only by currency in impressive quantities, or a bum accidentally locked in a liquor store overnight.

Pandora had them snugly tucked in place, like so many little green eggs in an incubator for freedom, and was on the point of shutting her valise, when she heard the key in the lock. She waited, hardly daring to breathe, hoping it was a mistake, and that whoever it was would simply go away. The door opened and footsteps approached her. For want of anything else to do, she finished locking the valise before turning around.

It was Peter. Pandora tried to read a hint from his face but his expression was perfectly blank and defeated her. "What—what are you doing home at this hour?" she ventured. "Is something wrong?"

"Isn't it time we stopped playing games?"

"Games?" Pandora kept one

hand on the valise and its precious contents. Perhaps Peter didn't really mean what he seemed to be saying. Perhaps he was referring to something else. Perhaps anything. Anything would be better. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Games," Peter repeated, "games based on words. Words like love and duty and marriage." His expression changed. The change was not reassuring. "Yes, and friendship."

"Nick," Pandora said, "he was supposed to be with you at the store. To keep you there."

"He was," Peter said. "He is."

"But you are here," Pandora forced herself to face the truth. "How did you find out? What went wrong?"

"Too much salt in the stew," Peter said. "When you prepare a dish for a man to swallow, a little seasoning is fine. But you chucked it in by the fistful and with both hands. Even so, I'll admit it took me a while. After all, you were my wife; the woman I swore to cherish. You might even have pulled it off. But the change was much too sudden, much too radical, and continued much too long—even for a man as blind as I have been. Did you really think I was that stupid?"

The word caught her. Stupid! Nick had warned her. But she

had been too sure to listen. Poor Nick. The argosy carrying his big break had been sunk before it even left the dock.

"So you've known all along."

"I paid the teller to 'phone me the instant you returned to the bank."

"And yet you let us go on playing it out? Nick and I."

"My wife and my best friend." Peter placed his hand over his heart.

Pandora knew what the gesture meant. Suddenly! Strangely! She was no longer frightened. She was angry. All her plans. Her hopes. Her dreams. Everything frustrated by the smug figure standing in her path.

All the wasted days of her life. All she could have been and what she was. All. All. ALL! And the years closing in like a trap to snare what remained of her youth. She felt the tide of her fury and resentment seethe and rise within her until it threatened her with strangulation if she couldn't give it release.

"Get out of my way!" she snarled. "I'm going out that door and I'll kill you if you try to stop me." She saw Peter watching her silently as, valise in hand, she started toward him. . . .

. . . strange as it may seem, it

is almost impossible for a permanent resident to vanish in a large city. To the uninitiated, a city like New York presents a single monolithic façade, with block after featureless block succeeding each other and only the changing names on the street signs to point a difference. Actually, a large city is composed of a vast number of tiny communities, each quick with its own life and with its gaze introverted to its own parochial interests and inhabitants.

To a citizen of one of these ingrown villages, accustomed to live and shop and seek his recreation within a section of two or three squares, a visit to the nearest park, a half mile away, constitutes high adventure, while the daily trek by the family breadwinner is titled "going to the city". The city, in this case, being any area beyond the immediate horizon.

Even in a neighborhood like the Village, with its passion for bizarre anonymity, it was extremely unlikely that the non-appearance of anyone like Pandora Peabody would remain long unnoticed. The gossip was casual, at first, and intended like most of its kind to help pass time—a limited commodity commonly misspent.

The gossip stopped being casual, and turned sharply pertinent, with the appearance of the lamp

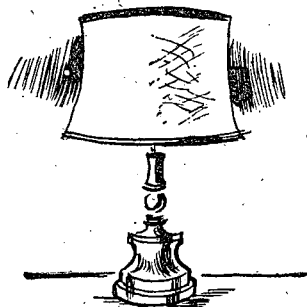
in Peter Peabody's store window. The lamp relegated the leopard from its favored position and caused it to view its world in the bias. The lamp was quite small for all the interest it aroused—particularly among some of the men.

The base of the lamp was a simple, rather nondescript bronze of no particular period or pattern. The shade, which was not too large, in keeping with the base, was of some parchment-like material. The only distinguishing note was struck by a design which seemed to be part of, rather than applied to, the shade. The design was a spider's web, with its delicate tracery extending in a complete arc.

Report of the gossip was finally brought to Lieutenant Gilligan by the harness cop on the beat. The cop, who had spent most of his uniformed life observing the denizens who inhabited these parts with a paternally suspicious eye, came to the Lieutenant after watching the seed of gossip sprout into a veritable tree of rumor. The cop was a dedicated family man, with a large and affectionate family, and was generally inclined to view the charges the authorities had placed in his care as so many excitable children. But he had learned, from personal experience,

that sometimes the fruit of the stories children told bore within them the seeds of truth.

Lieutenant Gilligan permitted a couple of days to pass, before taking official cognizance. From a long and somewhat battered career, he had learned it was better than even money that troubles between a man and his wife tended to simmer down if no third party was about to stir the pot. He wait-



ed; but the pot continued to boil. Pandora Peabody did not reappear.

Lieutenant Gilligan was a big man who managed to look sleepy and just a little stupid, during most of his waking hours. It was a mask he had found useful on more than one occasion. Actually, all of Lieutenant Gilligan's waking hours, and a large portion of his sleeping hours, were devoted to his job. There was a common, if slightly apocryphal, rumor that Lieutenant Gilligan had been born with the badge pinned to his skin.

Peter, as usual, was in the studio when the Lieutenant entered the store. He came out, when he heard the door open and waited silently for the other to speak.

The other introduced himself. "I'm Lieutenant Gilligan." He showed his credentials.

Peter didn't answer. He didn't seem interested.

Lieutenant Gilligan went on. Lack of answers were nothing new to him. "I understand Mrs. Peabody hasn't been seen for a while."

For the first time, he saw a glimmer of interest. "Mrs. Peabody," Peter said, "my wife, is gone."

Lieutenant Gilligan managed to avoid looking surprised. Direct replies were new. "Any idea where she's gone?"

The glimmer of interest had subsided.

Lieutenant Gilligan decided to try a new tack. "Did she have any reason to leave?"

It seemed to help. "My wife never did anything in her whole life without a reason."

"Do you expect her back?"

Again no answer was forthcoming.

Lieutenant Gilligan ignored the omission. If necessary, he could carry on both sides of a conversation by himself. It wouldn't be the first time.

He gazed about. "Remarkable things you make here. I've always noticed this place. Meant to come in and take a look, long before this."

No answer.

He walked over to the window, conscious that Peter was watching him. "That's a fine animal, that leopard. Looks lifelike. Must take some know-how, putting a thing like that together."

Silence.

Lieutenant Gilligan permitted himself to notice the lamp. "Here's something new. Weird looking shade. Parchment, isn't it?" Without looking around, he sensed there would be a reply.

It came. "It's not parchment."

"That 'decoration—the web—how was that done? It's not paint, is it?"

The short responses were becoming pointless. At this rate, they could spend forever without a conclusion. The time had come to hit him and hit him hard. Sometimes it was amazing, what crawled out when you cracked a shell.

Lieutenant Gilligan towered over Peter. It was a trick he had employed before. Making himself tall and glaring down at a suspect. It helped if the victim was small and spare—like Peter.

"It's no good, Mr. Peabody," he

barked. He stabbed a finger the size and shape of a billy at him. "There's been talk. Nasty talk and lots of it. About a lamp with a shade that's not parchment and a web that's not paint." He folded the finger back with its mates and waved the fist under Peter's nose. "I want answers. Direct answers. And plenty of them."

The shell smashed wide open. With hands that fumbled in their eagerness, Peter tore off his apron and worried at the buttons on his shirt. "You want to know where the web came from?" his words tumbled over each other. "You want answers. I'll do better than that. I'll show you. Here!" he ripped his shirt asunder and bared his chest.

Lieutenant Gilligan stared long and thoughtfully at the sight so suddenly thrust before him. It was unmistakable. An entire section of the skin covering the upper left half had been recently excised. There could be no error. The scar tissue was too fresh, too recent. The granulation was too new.

When Lieutenant Gilligan left, he did not look sleepy. He just looked sick.

Alone again, Peter closed his shirt as best he could, and went back into the studio. His movements were slow and awkward.

His chest still hurt. The throb was not as keen as it had been, but there was still more than enough to give him pain. And his violence, a moment ago, hadn't helped any.

The street lights had been probing their glowing pools against the gloom for hours, when Peter made his appearance again. A misty rain had fallen and the pools glistened and reflected the lights. Peter walked home through the silence of a great city brooding away the night, with only his own heel-taps for company, as he crossed the deserted street and mounted the steps.

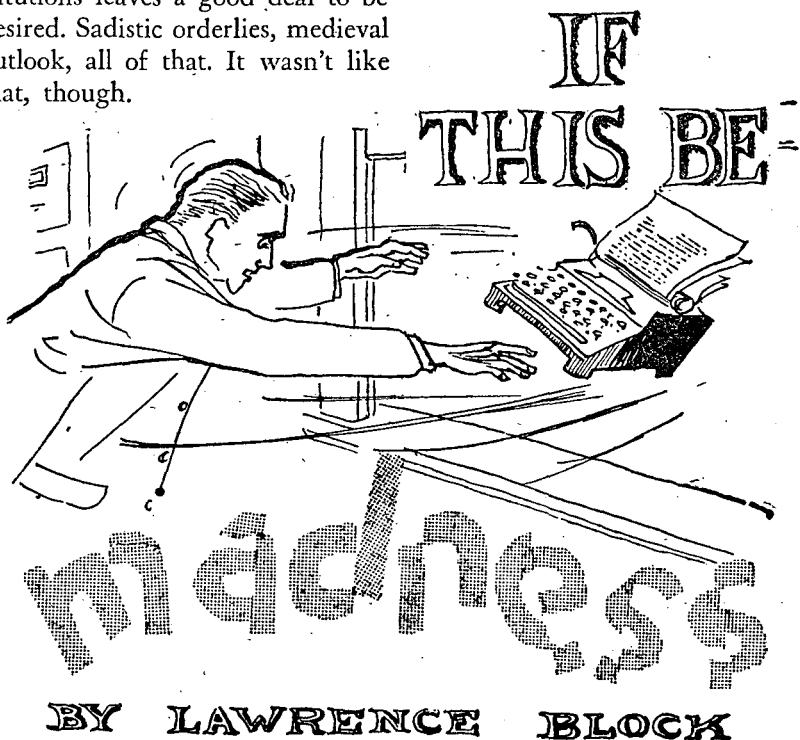
With the ease of long habit, Peter went along the dark corridor which bisected the unlit rooms, until he reached the bedroom. He paused for an interval, as if in thought, then reached out and flicked the switch on. The twin lamps with their parchment-like shades, on either side of his solitary bed, flared into brilliant life. They cast their webs in monstrous shadows against the walls and across the ceiling.

Peter approached the lamp on the right and gently fingered its shade. No question about it, this was the finest of the three. Something to do with the delicacy of its texture, no doubt.

There are many people who cherish a theory that it is impossible for a psychiatrist to detect malingering in the mentally ill. Their theory is that the psychiatrist himself is not entirely well, and they produce many plausible stories in support of their contention.

ST. ANTHONY'S wasn't a bad place at all. There were bars on the windows, of course, and one couldn't come and go as one pleased, but it might have been a lot worse. I had always thought of insane asylums as something rather grim. The fictional treatment of such institutions leaves a good deal to be desired. Sadistic orderlies, medieval outlook, all of that. It wasn't like that, though.

I had a room to myself, with a window facing out on the main grounds. There were a great many elms on the property, plus some lovely shrubs which I would be hard pressed to name. When I was alone I would watch the grounds-



keeper go back and forth across the wide lawn behind a big power mower. But of course I didn't spend all of my time in the room—or cell, if you prefer it. There was a certain amount of social intercourse—gab sessions with the other patients, interminable ping pong matches, all of that. And the occupational therapy which was a major concern at St. Anthony's. I made these foolish little ceramic tile plates, and I wove baskets, and I made potholders. I suppose this was of some value. The simple idea of concentrating very intently on something which is essentially trivial must have some therapeutic value in cases of this nature—perhaps the same value that hobbies have for sane men.

Perhaps you're wondering why I was in St. Anthony's. A simple explanation. One cloudless day in September I left my office a few minutes after noon and went to my bank, where I cashed a check for two thousand dollars. I asked for—and—received—two hundred crisp new ten-dollar bills. Then I walked aimlessly for two blocks until I came to a moderately busy street corner. Euclid and Paine, as I remember, but it's really immaterial.

There I sold the bills. I stopped passers-by and offered the bills at fifty cents apiece, or traded them

for cigarettes, or gave them away in return for a kind word. I recall paying one man fifteen dollars for his necktie, and it was spotted at that. Not surprisingly, a great many persons refused to have anything to do with me. I suspect they thought the bills were counterfeit.

In less than a half hour I was arrested. The police, too, thought the bills were counterfeit. They were not. When the police led me off to the patrol car I laughed uproariously and hurled the ten-dollar bills into the air. The sight of the officers of the law chasing after these fresh new bills was quite comic, and I laughed long and loud.

In jail, I stared around blindly and refused to speak to people. Mary appeared in short order with a doctor and a lawyer in tow. She cried a great deal into a lovely linen handkerchief, but I could tell easily how much she was enjoying her new role. It was a marvelous experiment in martyrdom for her—loving wife of a man who has just managed to flip his lid. She played it to the hilt.

When I saw her, I emerged at once from my lethargy. I banged hysterically on the bars of the cell and called her the foulest names imaginable. She burst into tears and they led her away. Someone gave me a shot of something—a

tranquillizer, I suspect. Then I slept.

I did not go to St. Anthony's then. I remained in jail for three days—under observation, as it were—and then I began to return to my senses. Reality returned. I was quite baffled about the entire experience. I asked guards where I was, and why. My memory was very hazy. I could recall bits and pieces of what had happened but it made no sense to me.

There were several conferences with the prison psychiatrist. I told him how I had been working very hard, how I had been under quite a strain. This made considerable sense to him. My "sale" of the ten dollar bills was an obvious reaction of the strain of work, a symbolic rejection of the fruits of my labors. I was fighting against overwork by ridding myself of the profits of that work. We talked it all out, and he took elaborate notes, and that was that. Since I had done nothing specifically illegal, there were no charges to worry about. I was released.

Two months thereafter, I picked up my typewriter and hurled it through my office window. It plummeted to the street below, narrowly missing the bald head of a Salvation Army trumpet player. I heaved an ashtray after the typewriter, tossed my pen out the window, pulled off my necktie and

hurled it out. I went to the window and was about to leap out after my typewriter and necktie and ashtray and pen when three of my employees took hold of me and restrained me, at which point I went joyously berserk.

I struck my secretary—a fine woman, loyal and efficient to the core—in the teeth, chipping one incisor rather badly. I kicked the office boy in the shin and belted my partner in the belly. I was wild, and quite difficult to subdue.

Shortly thereafter, I was in a room at St. Anthony's.

As I have said, it was not an unpleasant place at all. At times I quite enjoyed it. There was the utter freedom from responsibility, and a person who has not spent time in a sanitarium of one sort or another could not possibly appreciate the enormity of this freedom. It was not merely that there was nothing that I had to *do*. It goes considerably deeper than that.

Perhaps I can explain. I could *be* whomever I wished to be. There was no need to put up any sort of front whatsoever. There was no necessity for common courtesy or civility. If one wished to tell a nurse to go the devil, one went ahead and did so. If one wished, for any reason at all, to urinate upon the floor, one went ahead and did so. One needed to make

no discernible effort to appear sane. If I had been sane, after all, I would not have been there in the first place.

Every Wednesday, Mary visited me. This in itself was enough reason to fall in love with St. Anthony's. Not because she visited me once a week, but because for six days out of every seven I was spared her company. I have spent forty-four years on this planet, and for twenty-one of them I have been married to Mary, and her companionship has grown increasingly less tolerable over the years. Once, several years ago, I looked into the possibility of divorcing her. The cost would have been exorbitant. According to the lawyer I consulted, she would have wound up with house and car and the bulk of my worldly goods, plus monthly alimony sufficient to keep me permanently destitute. So we were never divorced.

As I said, she visited me every Wednesday. I was quite peaceable at those times; indeed, I was peaceable throughout my stay at St. Anthony's, aside from some minor displays of temper. But my hostility toward her showed through, I'm afraid. Periodically I displayed some paranoid tendencies, accusing her of having me committed for one nefarious motive or other, calling her to task for imagined af-

fairs with my friends (as if any of them would want to bed down with the sloppy old woman) and otherwise being happily nasty to her. But she kept returning, every Wednesday, like the worst of all possible pennies.

The sessions with my psychiatrist (not mine specifically, but the resident psychiatrist who had charge of my case) were not at all bad. He was a very bright man and quite interested in his work, and I enjoyed spending time with him. For the most part I was quite rational in our discussions. He avoided deep analysis—there was no time for it, really, as he had a tremendous work-load as it was—and concentrated instead in trying to determine just what was causing my nervous breakdowns and just how they could be best controlled. We worked things out rather well. I made discernible progress, with just a few minor lapses from time to time. We investigated the causes of my hostility toward Mary. We talked at length.

I remember very clearly the day they released me from St. Anthony's. I was not pronounced cured—that's a rather difficult word to apply in cases of this particular nature. They said that I was readjusted, or something of the nature, and that I was in con-

dition to rejoin society. Their terminology was a bit more involved than all that. I don't recall the precise words and phrases, but that's the gist of it.

That day, the air was cool and the sky was filled with clouds. There was a pleasant breeze blowing. Mary came to pick me up. She was noticeably nervous, perhaps afraid of me, but I was quite docile and perfectly friendly toward her. I took her arm. We walked out of the door to the car. I got behind the wheel—that gave her pause, as I think she would have preferred to do the driving just then. I drove, however, I drove the car out through the main gate and headed toward our home.

"Oh, darling," she said. "You're all better now, aren't you?"

"I'm fine," I said.

I was released five months ago. At first it was far more difficult on the outside than it had been within St. Anthony's heavy stone walls. People did not know how to speak with me. They seemed afraid that I might go berserk at any moment. They wanted to talk normally with me, yet they did not know how to refer to my "trouble". It was all quite hum-ourous.

People warmed to me, yet at the

same time they never entirely relaxed with me. While I was normal in most respects, certain mannerisms of mine were unnerving, to say the least. At times, for instance, I was observed mumbling incoherently to myself. At other times I answered questions before they were asked of me, or ignored questions entirely. Once, at a party, I walked over to the hi-fi, removed a record from the turntable, sailed it out of an open window, and put another record on. These periodic practices of mine were bizarre, and they set people on edge, yet they caused no one any real harm.

The general attitude seemed to be this—I was a little touched, but I was not dangerous, and I seemed to be getting better with the passage of time. Most important, I was able to function in the world at large. I was able to earn a living. I was able to live in peace and harmony with my wife and my friends. I might be quite mad, but it hurt no one.

Saturday night Mary and I are invited to a party. We will go to the home of some dear friends whom we have known for at least fifteen years. There will be eight or ten other couples there, all of them friends of a similar vintage.

It's time, now. This will be it.

You must realize that it was very difficult at first. The affair with the ten-dollar bills, for example—I'm essentially frugal, and such behaviour went very much against the grain. The time when I hurled the typewriter out of the window was even harder. I did not want to hurt my secretary, of whom I have always been very fond, nor did I want to strike all those other people. But I did very well, I think. Very well indeed.

Saturday night, at the party, I will be quite uncommunicative. I will sit in a chair by the fireside and nurse a single drink for an hour or two, and when people talk to me I will stare myopically at them and will not answer them. I will make little involuntary facial movements, nervous twitches of one sort or another.

Then I will rise abruptly and hurl my glass into the mirror over the fireplace, hard enough to shatter either the glass or the mirror or both. Someone will come over in an attempt to subdue me. Whoever it is, I will strike him or her with all my might. Then, cursing violently, I will hurry to the side of the hearth and will pick up the heavy cast-iron poker.

I will smash Mary's head with it.

The happy thing is that there

will be no nonsense about a trial. Temporary insanity may be difficult to plead in some cases, but it should hardly be a problem when the murderer has a past record of psychic instability. I have been in the hospital for a nervous breakdown. I have spent considerable time in a mental institution. The course is quite obvious—I shall be arrested and shall be sent forthwith to St. Anthony's.

I suspect they'll keep me there for a year or so. This time, of course, I can let them cure me completely. Why not? I don't intend to kill anyone else, so there's nothing to set up. All I have to do is make gradual progress until such time as they pronounce me fit to return to the world at large. But when that happens, Mary will not be there to meet me at the gate. Mary will be quite dead.

Already I can feel the excitement building within me. The tension, the thrill of it all. I can feel myself shifting over into the role of the madman, preparing for the supreme moment. Then the glass crashing into the mirror, and my body moving in perfect synchronization, and the poker in my hand, and Mary's skull crushed like an eggshell.

You may think I'm quite mad. That's the beauty of it—that's what everyone thinks, you see.



"THE DEAD MAN I can understand. The dead parakeet is what bothers me."

I looked up from the microscope. Lieutenant Ader hadn't brought me one of his weird cases for several months. No, that isn't a

by
 ARTHUR POE

fair way to put it, either. The fact is, I'd been discouraging him a bit lately. Work had piled up at Pasteur Hospital. I'm the pathologist there—Dr. Joel Hoffman. So when Ader had tried to get me involved a few times earlier that year, I'd squirmed out of it by showing him all the jobs they'd lined up for me in the lab. Then, naturally, he wanted to avoid pestering me. Now I felt a little guilty; I like the lieutenant, and quite often in the

In the language of an ancient philosopher, "Birds Of One Feather Flock Together" . . . a pronouncement no doubt based upon his own personal observations. Still, there are cases when the observation does not hold true. The cuckoo in the nest is one.

past we'd made a good team. He uses me as a sort of scientific consultant—without pay, I might add, but that part isn't his fault. The coroner, whose function I was so blithely usurping, didn't care; he was on salary, a fat one. The lieutenant loves to bypass Dr. Kurzin anyhow, since the old boy is not exactly a Spilsbury. In my book he should be cutting meat for some supermarket.

Now I turned on my stool, snapped out the microscope lamp, and said: "Okay, tell Poppa more about it."

"It's just as I've been saying. They found Horton dead by his car, apparently about to change a tire that was almost flat. Death turned out to be due to cyanide poisoning."

"Who said so?" I demanded.

He looked sheepish.

"Kurzin, I'm sorry to say."

I shook my head in disgust.

"Be reasonable, Zee. How the devil can I work on a case when the P. M.'s been done by that idiot? For all we know, the victim died of acute dandruff!"

"Don't exaggerate," Ader snapped. "I could smell the bitter almonds myself. There was nothing tricky about that part. Besides, old Kurzin had a bright med student—his nephew—helping out; they both said it was definitely

cyanide. Seems to be no question."

"Lord help us—another generation of Kurzins coming to louse up future crime detection. All right," I added hastily, as the lieutenant showed his impatience at that irrelevance. "Let's assume for once he got it straight. What's your complaint, then?"

"Well," he said unhappily, "maybe I'm just looking for trouble; it's such a minor matter. But why the dead bird?"

"You mean the parakeet they found with him?"

"Yes. He always took it along. It perched on his shoulder; you know how they are. So the guy finds he has a flat, and gets out to change it. Then and there—how, I can't imagine—he takes, or is given, cyanide, and dies in a few seconds. Must have been a big dose, because he collapsed right there, and never budged. But why the bird—and how?"

"I don't see the problem. If he was given, or took, some poisoned food, he must have let the bird have a nibble. What's so odd about that?"

"Kurzin says Horton's stomach was empty; no food at all. He certainly didn't eat before starting on the flat; there were no traces of anything—I mean bags, garbage; that sort of stuff."

"There are other things he

might possibly have swallowed."

"Very true; in fact he did take some aspirin. Kurzin found traces in his stomach."

"Well," I said, "if a person wanted to kill somebody with cyanide, what better way than to add it to the victim's aspirin? It would be easy to mould some into a tablet that looked just like the harmless ones. The salt is white, you know. This way, too, the murderer could be miles from the spot, with a good alibi."

"Yeah," he said in a gloomy voice. "That was the consensus of my brilliant colleagues, but I can't buy it. My instinct says there's something wrong. You see why, I'm sure."

I considered the situation for a moment, then stood up.

"I think I do. It doesn't quite add up. The dead parakeet spoils the picture. A man might let the bird peck at his apple, or a cookie, or even the lettuce from his sandwich; but who feeds aspirin to a parakeet?"

"Exactly the point," Ader said, his brown eyes shining. "Now take it from there. How was this guy given poison in such a way as to kill the bird, too, and without leaving any food either in his stomach, or at the scene of the crime? I've been wondering about that for days, but can't come up with an

answer that makes any sense. That's the only reason I'm bothering you again, with all that work on your hands. You have a knack for seeing through these puzzlers I run into."

Part of that was the old oil, of course; but the two of us had figured out a few tricky ones together.

"I suppose the autopsy specimens are gone by now."

"According to the state law," Ader reminded me, "Kurzin didn't have to keep 'em—only swear to his findings; you know that."

"Too bad. If he and the med student goofed, we'll be following a false lead."

"You could go over the report," Ader suggested, and I groaned. Reading one of Kurzin's official documents gave me the same feeling an editor would have if forced to plough through a handwritten manuscript submitted by a near-illiterate.

"All right," I agreed reluctantly. "Have it sent over. Maybe, at that, it can't be much worse than 'Sixty Six Sunrise Square'." I'd planned to watch that show on TV in the evening; don't ask me why, unless it's because the program can be followed with only two per cent of the brain cells without missing a single cliché. That's very restful, and makes for fruitful medita-

tion. The answer might emerge.

Well, that night I went over Kurzin's report, which was more incoherent than usual. But he did have the facts on cyanide poisoning fairly straight, no doubt because it's so common only an idiot could miss. There was obvious corrosion of the gastric mucosa, and similar traces of the nasty stuff in other parts of the body. I inferred, unhappily, that having found the poison in Horton's stomach, Kurzin hadn't bothered looking much further. There was no estimate of relative distribution to the brain and other organs at all. With what he had, plus the bitter almond smell, he wasn't the kind to poke around; that might hold up the poker game.

So when Ader came for my reaction, I wasn't able to tell him much.

"It seems to be cyanide, all right," I said cautiously. "But about the parakeet, I'm no better informed than when we began. Why not try another angle? How about motive? If you find out who had that, the method might be clear."

"There's always motive," he said in a weary voice. "Hell, if I found Albert Schweitzer dead, it would turn out he had fifty enemies! In this case, it's a lot worse. Insurance, for example; he had twenty thou-

sand dollars worth in favor of his wife. Then there's revenge. You see, he was a loan shark—need I say more? No? Well, I will. This guy never let anybody off the hook. *But* if you were a pretty gal, the payoff didn't necessarily have to be in cash. Now, I ask you, if you were a husband, and found that your wife was in the tender clutches of a guy like Horton, and that maybe she'd paid off without cash, how would you feel? Motive? Brother, I could almost murder the swine myself, and I never even met him alive!"

"Tell me again about how they found him."

"A passing motorist saw him sprawled by the car on the shoulder of the road. Being a bright fellow, he phoned the highway patrol."

"You're sure he didn't mess up any evidence?"

"Positive; he had good sense. All right, the highway boys radioed me, and I found Horton dead, lying by the right front tire. He'd removed it, and was about to put on the spare. The bad one had a slow leak; made by a nail, I'd say; anyhow, it was almost flat. The way we figure it, he was going along the El Toro Road, minding his own business like the other vultures in the area—only they're honest, legitimate ones; the kind

that fly—when he realizes the tire's down, and pulls over. He gets out, tweetie bird on one shoulder, jacks up the front tire, and removes the wheel. He gets the spare, and is about to put it on, when the poison begins to work. That cyanide is very quick, I understand."

"It depends on the dose, but on the whole, yes; there's nothing much faster."

"At least the sequence of events is simple," the lieutenant said, as if searching for a comforting thought. "No fancy time-table; no guesswork. A child could reconstruct exactly what happened there. If it wasn't for that damned bird . . ."

"Without the parakeet, you'd say he got the cyanide with his aspirin, I presume."

"I suppose so," he agreed half-heartedly.

"Look," I told him. "Let me think about it all for a while. We both know that sometimes the pieces fall in place if you poke away at them for a few hours. Maybe it'll seem very simple by tomorrow."

He brightened. "That's what I was hoping you'd say. You always have worked that way. Remember that goofy horsecollar murder? And the old woman with her attic full of junk?"

"Don't remind me; they almost

sprained my headbone, as Pogo might say. Now get out, and let me think."

He left, rubbing his hands hopefully. Ader has a lot of faith in me. Sometimes I think he forces me to perform over my head, if you know what I mean. But in this case, things were different. I didn't have data of my own, but had to depend on somebody rather incompetent. For all I knew, Horton's stomach might not have been really empty. For example, if he'd eaten a couple of peanuts, and given his pet a few, Kurzin might have missed the small amount of food involved. Then I remembered that the lieutenant had checked the scene for food, and found nothing. On his own ground, Ader is unbeatable; if he didn't find any food, there wasn't any around.

I studied the police photo of the dead man. Like all official enlargements, it was sharp; a horrible technique for a glamor portrait, but ideal as evidence.

There was Horton, a chubby fellow who might have been somebody's benevolent uncle by the look of him. His face was badly contorted, naturally; cyanide is potent stuff; it may be fast, but time is relative, and there are easier deaths, which take longer. Beside him was a pathetic bit of fluff that

was his parakeet. No doubt he'd been fond of the bird. Another case of loving lower animals and hating the "higher" ones, our fellow-men. The Nazis had been like that. Maybe it isn't so crazy to prefer birds to people; but then a loan shark is least qualified to look down on his fellow men.

The dead bird obtruded itself again. Without it there was no puzzle about how—only who.

I went back to the report. Maybe the bird hadn't been poisoned at all. Suppose somebody had just strangled it to confuse the police. My idea didn't pan out, though; they had found no marks of violence on the tiny body; and Kurzin claimed cyanide caused that death, too.

Then I began to think about birds in general, hoping to find a useful line of attack. They have their own peculiar weaknesses; they are light and fragile, with hollow bones. Otherwise, flight would be impossible. A bird can be frightened to death very easily; its metabolism is high; it runs a perpetual fever. Canaries are highly sensitive to dangerous fumes; in mines they are used—or were—to detect fire damp and similar deadly gases.

And at that moment, it was as if a flashbulb went off in my brain. The pieces fell together, and I

knew the solution was very close. It had to be right. And if so, there was still danger for innocent people; right now somebody could be near his death. I got on the phone fast.

"Zee," I said hurriedly. "Where's the car Horton was driving? The one in the police photo."

"Still in our garage—impounded. Why? You sound excited. We went over it very carefully—what did we miss?"

"Never mind that now. Call them, or radio, whatever you do, and make it clear nobody is to mess with that car. They should stay far away. Maybe even evacuate the garage. Got it?"

"What's it all about? Don't be so damned mysterious."

Perhaps I should have given him a hint over the phone, but I had a sudden urge to spring it all at once, dramatically. Too much TV, maybe.

"Meet me there in twenty minutes. I may have the answer we need."

"I hope so," was his fervent reply. "There isn't even the right question at this end."

At the big police garage, Adler led me to the car.

"How did it get here?" I wanted to know. "By towing?"

"No; that wasn't necessary. The sergeant finished putting on the

spare, and then he drove it back."

I gave a low whistle.

"Lucky fellow. He could be as dead as Horton, if my theory is correct."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'll tell you. And I'm so sure this must be it that I won't even cheat by testing my solution in advance before sounding off. The dead bird was the clue, just as you thought, genius. You know, it's not easy to tell poisoning by hydrogen cyanide gas from the kind caused by a salt—say, potassium cyanide. I'll bet anything that Kurzin and his nephew missed the significant differences by not checking the nose and lungs carefully."

Ader gaped at me.

"You mean Horton was gassed? That nothing went into his mouth?"

"Yes."

"But that's impossible. He was out there alone; no signs of a struggle. Nobody's going to hold still for an execution."

"Tell me, among the suspects was there anybody in the exterminator business? You know, bugs?"

"Well, we checked all the people on our list for their possible ways to get cyanide. We found a photographer; he uses the stuff to tone pictures—he says."

"That's right; they do."

"Then there's a metalworking foreman; his plant uses pounds of the chemicals. Let me see." He fished out his worn notebook. "Hm. One guy does have a brother-in-law who works for the 'Bug Out Company'—what a name! But why him? What about the first two?"

"You miss the point; they don't use gas, and exterminators often do—in tanks, under pressure."

"You trying to say somebody brought out a tank of cyanide gas, and gave Horton a face full right on the road? How would they know he was going to stop, unless . . ."

"Hold that last thought; it's correct. About that stop, I mean. But no tank, no murderer on the spot was needed. Let me lay it out for you."

"Horton is driving along, when he finds his front tire has a slow leak—made by the killer, that's for sure. All right, he pulls over, gets out the spare, and prepares to change wheels. My guess is he notices that the spare is very hard—it would have to be obviously much over-pressured for the victim not to miss it—to take the bait. What would you do in that case?"

"I'd let some air out."

"Exactly what Horton must have done. He reached over, pressed the valve, and releases a

big blast of what he assumes is air. He doesn't stop to wonder how the tire got that way, or maybe he does; but who would suspect the real truth? Anyhow, it isn't air at all, but cyanide gas under high pressure, fed right from a tank of the stuff into the tire. A tiny whiff would be plenty; Horton got a whole cloud; and the bird on his shoulder enough to wipe out an aviary."

Ader shook his head. "Holy jumping Jerusalem—" he began.

"Let's check it out," I said, "before we rejoice too much. Stand back, and I'll let out a smidgeon of something or other from the right front tire. It's lucky for that sergeant of yours that Horton brought the pressure down to about normal with his one fatal blast, because otherwise you'd have another corpse." Here I gave the valve a tiny push, then very carefully fanned the air above it, urging some towards my nose. The bitter almond smell was unmistakable.

"That's it, all right," Ader said, sniffing in a gingerly way. His

eyes narrowed. "The killer must be connected with Horton's garage. Nobody else could have doctored a tire that way."

He turned out to be right about that. A mechanic at the garage had a pretty sister, whose husband worked for the exterminator. He had been in a bad way financially, after a severe illness; and his wife, in despair, had gone to Horton for money. The loan-shark had given it to her, and then tried for payment in other coin than cash, finally terrifying her into submission. His kind know how to frighten people. But her brother, the mechanic, found out what happened to his sister, and decided to remove Horton for good. It was easy for him to borrow a tank of cyanide from the brother-in-law's plant.

I was hoping he'd get away, out of the country, but Ader's too quick and careful. All the killer said when they booked him was: "I'm sorry about the little parakeet, but it shouldn't have teamed up with a vulture. 'Birds of one feather flock together'."

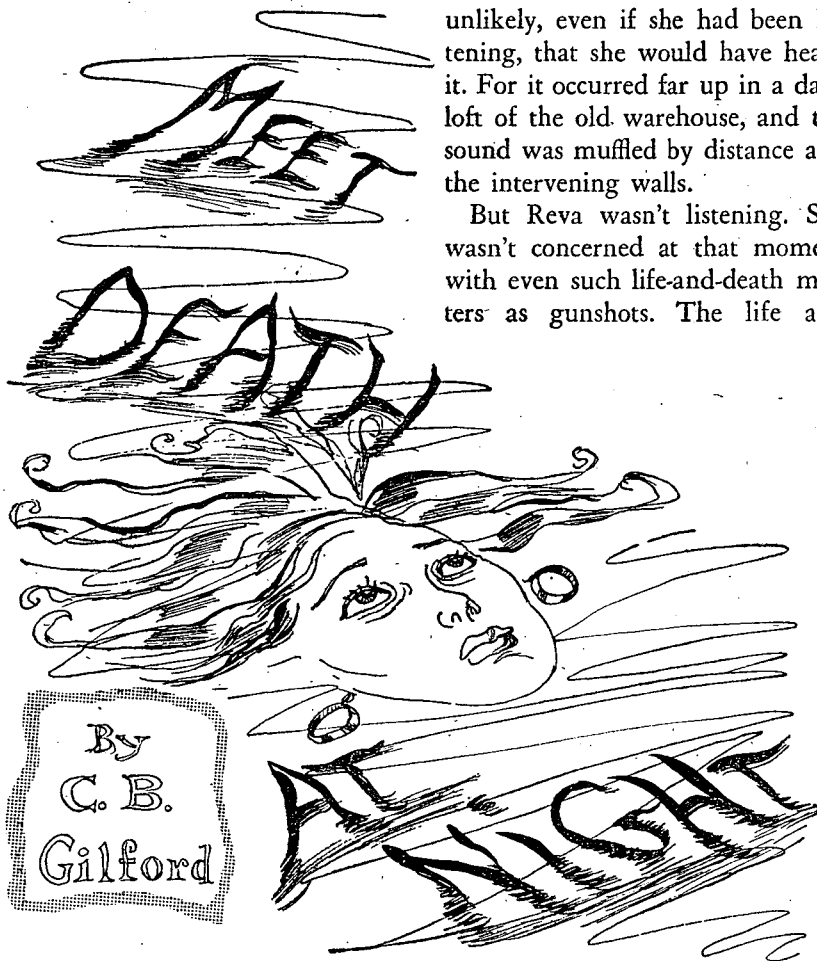


There seems to be little safety these days even in being rescued. This poor girl tried suicide and found her benefactor more dangerous than her second chance at life.



SHE didn't hear the shot. It was unlikely, even if she had been listening, that she would have heard it. For it occurred far up in a dark loft of the old warehouse, and the sound was muffled by distance and the intervening walls.

But Reva wasn't listening. She wasn't concerned at that moment with even such life-and-death matters as gunshots. The life and



By
C. B.
Gilford

death she had on her mind were her own, and she was considering destroying one and embracing the other.

The thing she was looking at was the river. It flowed by at her feet black and murky and almost silent, its only sound a gentle lapping at the piles of the wharf. It was a deceptively peaceful sound for the current in spots was strong and treacherous. But the blackness and the murkiness were inviting. Down beneath the shining surface, beneath the reflection of far-away city lights, there was peace. She took a half step closer.

In the warehouse a man was running down steep flights of wooden stairs, careless of the noise of his footsteps. The place was deserted. As for possible witnesses outside of the wharves, if they hadn't heard the shot, it was unlikely that they'd hear the pounding of his feet.

One person might have heard that sound of retreat and escape. Reva, with her delicate, beautiful little white ears from which the cheap, glistening bangles hung. But she was staring down at the toes of her right foot, which showed through the open-work of the shoe. They were at the very edge of the wharf. She really didn't have to throw herself into the water, she had only to lean for-

ward a little bit, and relax. . . .

The gunman's footsteps were a clatter on the concrete floor of the warehouse now. Then there was the sound of a door opening, swinging on slightly rusty hinges. He was outside, glancing in all directions, wanting to make sure that his exit was unobserved before abandoning the shadows of the doorway.

Reva had acted at almost the same instant. The courage had finally come to her. After all, it did take courage. Her body had swayed toward the river, she had allowed the tenseness to drain out of her muscles. With a flash of those tawdry ear rings, arcing through the darkness like thrown away cigarettes, she tumbled through unresisting air, fell into the water with a splash that was louder than the gunshot had been.

The man saw her go. He saw the pale flash of the ear rings. He knew it was a girl. He knew she'd gone into the water purposefully, not accidentally. He stood frozen in the doorway, a strange assortment of instincts battling inside him. After the first splash there had been no other sound, not even a gurgle. The river flowed quietly by, unconcerned, perhaps even unaware.

The man moved slowly, staying hidden in shadow as much as he

could. He drifted furtively across the wharf, his shoes making hollow sounds on the old boards. Finally, almost reluctantly, he reached the edge, and looked down into the water.

For eyes like his, accustomed to the darkness, it wasn't hard to find the girl. Not a complete girl, of course. Just a white oval face floating on the putrid, befouled river like a water lily on a fragrant pond.

The thought must have come to him, if she wants to die, why doesn't she turn over and submerge her face? Why does she want to prolong the agony? Is it that she prefers to die while gazing upward at the stars? Thoughts such as these could have come to this man, who was an expert in the details of death. He had seen more than one man die, struggling against the lethal fire in his guts, clutching desperately at life. Here was someone who actually wanted to die. Temporary insanity. It had to be something like that. People just didn't die willingly.

Whatever his thoughts, his body was rigid and poised on the edge of the wharf. Possibly his mind did not make a definite decision. Possibly his body acted automatically, and his mind forgot that he was a killer by trade, and his whole being reacted as an ordi-

nary, law-abiding citizen might. Whatever the complex or the primitive motivations involved, the physical movements were suddenly swift. He peeled his jacket off and cast it aside on the wharf. Then came the shoulder holster with its weighty steel contents. And finally his shoes.

He entered the water with a perfect flat dive, and his arms were flailing immediately in a powerful crawl stroke. He was a strong, skilled swimmer, and he reached the girl before she fully realized that a rescue was being attempted.

That realization came too late. She might have tried to elude him, or to disappear under the surface so he couldn't find her. She did neither. When his hand grasped her upper arm, she began to struggle. But he seemed to be prepared for that. Something, either his fist or the palm of his hand, hit her in the face. She wasn't knocked unconscious, but merely stunned into obedience and resignation. The man commenced to tow her back toward the wharf, and she didn't resist. Instead, she surrendered to the joy of the moment—somebody was concerned for her welfare, somebody cared.

When they reached the wharf, she did not have to be told what to do. The man helped her, of course, but mostly she used her

own strength to climb up. She went first, and he followed. Then they faced each other, dripping, in the dimness, saying nothing in the beginning, listening to their own labored breathing and the puddling of water beneath their feet.

"Little girl," the man said finally, "that was stupid."

He had called her a little girl, and somehow his choice of words sent a pleasant chill through her. She was young, yes, and small; but she no longer thought of herself as a little girl.

"I suppose I should thank you," she said, meaning she should be grateful for the words rather than the deed.

"Don't bother," he interrupted gruffly.

That was the kind of talk she was more used to. "I won't," she told him. "Why don't you mind your own business?"

He made a funny little derisive noise at that, then instead of attempting more conversation, sat down and started pulling on his shoes. Then he picked up the shoulder holster and strapped it over his wet shirt.

"Are you a cop?" she asked him.

He seemed to grin at that. She couldn't see his face clearly in the dimness, but she'd already gotten the notion that he was sort of good-looking. There was no doubt

that his shoulders were broad and that he was strong.

"Well, what are you going to do with me?" she demanded. "Turn me in to the cops?"

"I'm not looking for any cops," he assured her. "But that's a good question. What am I going to do with you? Take you home, I guess."

She shook her head. "I don't have a home."

"How about an address then?"

"No address. Why don't you just throw me back in the water?"

"After all the trouble I've gone to already? I like to finish the things I start."

He had her by the arm again suddenly, and his grip was as futile to resist as it had been in the water. She walked along beside him because she had no choice. She'd lost her shoes in the river, and the rough cobblestones they encountered as they turned away from the wharf were cruel to her feet. The man didn't realize it, or simply didn't care, because he dragged her along at a fast pace.

Fortunately it wasn't a long walk. In a cluster of very black shadows there was a car. The man opened the door on the driver's side, shoved her in ahead of him past the steering wheel, and before she could settle down on the seat,

the car was already in motion.

She didn't ask him where they were going. She tried not even to think of the strangeness of her situation. The car, she sensed, was an expensive one. The seat was leather, and the wetness of the passengers probably wouldn't damage it. Also it was soft and comfortable, and the only thing she disliked about the ride was the night breeze coming through the windows and plastering her thin, sodden dress to her already chilled skin.

"I guess I could drop you off at the Salvation Army or some place like that,"—he said after a while.

"What's the difference?" she asked him.

"Then I suppose you'd head right back for the river the first chance you got."

"I guess I would."

"That's what I don't like," he told her. "When I bother to save somebody's life, I want it to stay saved. Just like when I . . ." Unaccountably he didn't finish the sentence.

The rest of the ride was in complete silence. They entered a neighborhood of rather swank apartment buildings. The car stopped in a dark area at the rear of one of them.

"The shape we're in," the man said, "we'll have to go up the back

way and hope nobody sees us."

He led her by the hand, through a huge basement garage, to an empty service elevator. They went secretly and stealthily, like burglars, and nobody saw them. They got off at the sixth floor, and hurried down a thickly carpeted corridor. The man produced a key, opened a door, flicked a light switch, and they were inside.

Reva couldn't resist a pleased exclamation. "Boy, do you live in a swell place!"

"This isn't mine," he corrected her. "It belongs to a girl named Diane who is out of town for a while. She's the generous kind, and she won't care."

Reva did as she was told then. She walked into a big, frilly bedroom, stripped off her own wet things, hung them in the adjoining bath, rubbed herself dry with an enormous Turkish towel, then had several closets of clothes to choose from. She selected a thick, warm robe finally, and found a pair of slippers for her feet.

When she emerged, she could smell fresh coffee percolating, and her savior, in dry clothes himself, was waiting for her. He really was good-looking, she decided now. Not like a movie actor though, more like an athlete. He wasn't tall, but he seemed very solid. His face was square and pleasant, his

dark hair, though very short, was curly, and his eyes were brown and gentle.

"How do you feel?" he wanted to know.

"I feel fine."

He brought in the coffee, in a big silvery percolator. It was hot, and completed the job of warming her up. They sat in chairs opposite each other and sipped it, and eventually they talked.

"What's your name?" he asked her.

"Reva Renard."

"Real name?"

She shook her head.

"Are you married, Reva?"

"No, I'm not."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a model."

He raised his eyebrows. "What covers are you on this month?" He wasn't trying to belittle her, but it amounted to the same thing.

"All right," she said, "I'm not on any covers. I'm not anywhere. I've had to do other things."

"And I don't suppose you liked those other things."

"I hated them."

"But you're a very pretty girl, Reva Renard. Why don't you go back to the home town and marry one of your old boy friends?"

She shook her head fiercely at that suggestion, and the bangles, still clinging to her ears, rattled

unmusically. "It's too late for me to do that now. That's the whole point, don't you see?"

He pretended at least that he saw. "So that's why you jumped in the river tonight?"

"Yes. And you didn't help matters any when you pulled me out. I'm warm and dry, but nothing has really changed."

He nodded. "I know. I have a responsibility for you now."

He told her then to stay and live in this apartment for a while, at least till she had a better chance to think things over. There was food in the apartment, and plenty of clothes. Diane, the girl who lived here, wouldn't be back for weeks. And of course he'd be dropping in frequently. Rather than argue with him, she consented to the arrangement.

"What's your name?" she asked him at the door as he was leaving.

"Real name?"

"Whatever name you go by."

"All right. It's Johnny Cone."

"That's a funny name. It sounds like a . . ."

"Like what?"

"Like a gangster or something."

"You have quite an imagination, little girl."

When he had gone, she leaned against the door and let that strange little thrill run through her body again. He had called her

a little girl for the second time, even after she had told him something about herself. She even forgot for the moment that he had a funny-sounding name like Johnny Cone.

The next morning she discovered that Diane's newspaper deliveries hadn't been stopped when she left town, and the early edition lay in the hallway by the door. Because she was lonely Reva Renard opened the paper and read it. The murder was on the front page.

The victim's name was Nick Tavener. It was a name familiar to her, of course, as it was familiar to everybody in town. Nick Tavener had been the boss of most of the rackets. That's what people had always thought anyway, even though the police had never proved it sufficiently to keep Nick in jail very long. Well, now they wouldn't have to worry about Nick any more. He'd been shot, murdered in cold blood, in one of those old warehouses down by the wharves.

The news article also listed some of Nick's associates, men whom the police certainly intended to question now. There were a dozen names on this list, and among them was the name Johnny Cone.

Reva spent the hours after that listening for the ring of the doorbell or the phone. Neither instrument obliged. The afternoon newspaper gave further information on the murder of Nick Tavener, which seemed to be stirring up quite a fuss generally. Some of the obvious suspects had already been questioned, among them Johnny Cone. The results of the questioning were not being made public, but no arrests seemed to have been made.

In between reading the paper and thinking about Johnny, Reva spent the rest of the time sitting at Diane's boudoir table. She worked at her long black hair till it didn't look like she'd been in the river the night before. She even managed to erase some of the dark circles under her blue eyes. Johnny had said she was pretty, and she agreed with him. At first she'd been reluctant to use anything out of Diane's wardrobe. But now she found a blue dress that exactly matched her eyes, and she put it on and sat down in the living room to wait hopefully for Johnny.

It was almost eleven when he arrived. He raised his eyebrows when he saw the blue dress, and he smiled, to himself mostly, it seemed. "You're prettier than I thought you were," he said.

She wished then that he would take her in his arms and kiss her. But then she wondered why he should do a thing like that. She didn't really matter to him. Anyway, he didn't kiss her.

Possibly, however, the reason for the oversight was the fact that the things he saw next were the newspapers lying spread out on the coffee table. He looked at them for a long minute, then back to her.

He didn't waste time trying to pretend. "I spent most of the day today down at Homicide," he announced frankly. "They thought maybe I killed Nick Tavener. What made them think it was that I had reasons for killing Nick. But they couldn't prove that I was anywhere around that warehouse. In fact, I could prove that I was at the other end of town at the time. I spent the whole evening playing poker at Charlie Plant's."

He sat down on the long, enormous sofa and smiled up at her. "Have you located the liquor supply yet?" he asked her. "Why don't you fix me a scotch with a little water?"

"I don't know where it is."

He pointed. "Over there. That's not a snack bar, little girl. It's a liquor bar. And Diane always stocked the best."

She hurried to obey him. When

she brought the glass back to him, he sampled it without comment. "Aren't you joining me?" he asked.

"I don't like it very much," she answered.

"Or is it that you want to keep a clear head for thinking?"

"I've been doing quite a bit of thinking."

"It took your mind off your own problems for a while anyway, didn't it?"

"Yes, I haven't thought of myself at all since I read the morning paper. I've just been thinking of you."

He smiled. "Besides picking out a blue dress that matches your eyes, that is."

"Maybe I did that because I was thinking of you too."

If he understood what she meant, he gave no sign. "I really didn't hurry back here," he said, "because I thought you'd probably left. Either you'd gone back to the river the minute I was out of sight, or you read the morning paper, put a simple two and two together, and headed for parts unknown."

She sat down in a nearby chair. "If you don't care whether you live or die," she told him, "then there's no reason to be afraid."

He smiled at her again. His eyes were very intelligent. He did-

n't look hard or cruel. He didn't look like a gangster at all. "If a person cares enough to pick out a dress that matches her eyes, then that person also cares whether she lives or dies," he pointed out gently.

She tried not to be angry with him because she really had no right to. "Do you think I'll squeal on you, Johnny?" she asked him.

"It's possible."

"But you saved my life."

"Yes, that's what's stopping you, temporarily at least. If it weren't for that, and you had important information on a murder, you'd give it to the police in a minute. That's because you're naturally a public-spirited citizen."

"Well, I haven't squealed yet, Johnny."

"I know that. Because if you had, I'd have heard from the boys at Homicide."

"Don't you trust me, Johnny?"

The smile never left his face, and he answered softly. He wasn't trying to scare her, just stating a fact. "In my business, little girl, if you want to be a success, you don't trust anybody."

She could have cried in her frustration. Why didn't he understand her? He'd had enough experience with women. Like Diane, for instance. No, maybe that was the trouble. All his experience had

been with such women as Diane.

"What are you going to do then," she asked him, "since you don't trust me?"

"That's what's been on my mind today, Reva." His eyes had narrowed ever so slightly, his smile was gone, and he had stopped calling her "little girl."

"Are you going to kill me?"

He glanced away, and looked at his empty glass instead. "You'll have to admit," he said, "that's the only way I could be absolutely sure of being safe."

"But that's so silly," she objected. "What about all those people at Charlie Plant's who told the police you were playing poker with them last night when you weren't? Do you have to kill all of them too?"

He smiled again, but it was a weary smile, without gaiety. "I can't seem to get this through your head, can I? Charlie Plant and the other guys, they've all got good reasons to back up my alibi. But that's not the most important thing. I trust them because they're used to lying. That's the difference between them and you, don't you see? You're not used to lying. It goes against everything you are. You're an honest little girl, and you've got a conscience. A conscience spells trouble in my business."

She wanted to go to him, to touch him, to run her hands over his forehead and smooth out the creases. "I guess I should be flattered if that's your opinion of me," she said instead.

"Maybe you should."

"But it seems so silly for you to be wondering whether you ought to kill me when just last night you went to so much trouble to save my life."

He squirmed a little, and he didn't answer. Finally he got up, still avoiding her eyes, walking to the little bar, and fixed himself a second drink.

"Why did you save me last night?" she asked, pursuing him with the question. "You had just shot a man, and you were trying to get away without anybody seeing you. But then you jumped in the water after me. That took you a long time, when you could have been escaping. You took a big chance with your alibi to save the life of a stranger."

He turned, with the fresh drink in his hand, to face her. "What are you trying to do now," he demanded, "flatter me?"

She looked down at the blue dress and her hands twisting in her lap, and she said, "I don't know what there was between you and Nick Tavener. Maybe he deserved to be shot. But I think

you're a pretty nice guy, Johnny."

He slammed the untasted drink down on the surface of the bar, spilling quite a lot of it. Then he walked across the room, opened the door, and went out.

Reva called after him, but he didn't come back.

She had a plan. She worked it out in her devious, intricate little feminine brain during the next two days while she waited for Johnny. She worked it out as she sat in front of Diane's mirror and tried to make herself as pretty as she could for Johnny's sake. And she was very hopeful, because the mirror promised her. She'd always been pretty, that was how she'd gotten by. But the scars were disappearing, the scars of the things she's had to do and hadn't liked. A better face was being born in the mirror, an almost beautiful face, an almost happy face, with sparkling eyes full of light and lips that wanted to be kissed.

She continued to read the newspapers, of course. The murder of Nick Tavener was still making the front page. The police were certain it had been a gang killing, which narrowed down the list of suspects. But there'd been no arrests.

Johnny Cone returned to the apartment finally after an absence of forty-eight hours. The passage of time had affected him adversely. He looked tired, strained.

He confronted Reva in the doorway of the apartment when she answered the bell, and for a few seconds they stood close to each other. It was he who had to speak first, and his voice was hoarse and somehow hollow.

"Diane is coming back to town," he announced. "You'll have to vacate."

"All right," she answered quickly. "Just give me a minute to change back to my own clothes."

"You don't have to. Diane won't mind . . ."

"But I mind. After living in her apartment for three days, I don't want to thank her by stealing from her."

"Oh yes, that conscience of yours. All right, go ahead. I'll wait."

She tried to ignore the menace in his words, and retired quickly to the bedroom. When she climbed back into her old black dress and saw herself in the mirror, she had a moment of despair. The black dress cancelled out the beautiful face. It was tight, thin, as cheap as the person who wore it. She didn't like herself, how could Johnny like her? Still, she couldn't change

her mind about the dress now. When she went back to the living room, she refused to meet his gaze.

But he seemed to ignore the dress, or not to care. "My car's downstairs," he told her.

She followed him down obediently. She got a better look at the car this time. It was long and shiny and new. Johnny was prosperous.

When they were on their way, and she was far over in her corner of the seat, watching his grim profile as he drove, she finally asked the question. "Have you decided yet, Johnny?"

"Decided what?"

"About me. Are you going to kill me for the sake of your alibi?"

He chewed his lower lip. "You don't mind putting it straight, do you?"

"Why don't you put it straight to me, Johnny?"

"I'll admit I've been thinking about it." He paused, then continued more swiftly. "All right, here it is straight. There's only one thing that holds me back. And that's how I might feel. Killing you wouldn't be the same as killing Nick Tavener."

"How did you feel when you were killing him?"

"I felt nothing. Absolutely nothing. No more than a man does when he sees a rat in a garbage can and he shoots it."

"But it would be different with me?"

"Sure it would be different."

"How?"

"Well, if I killed you, I'd be killing something innocent. And you couldn't call Nick Tavener innocent."

"I'm not innocent either, Johnny."

"Yes, you are. I don't care what you think about yourself, because you're wrong. You're innocent . . . and you're good."

"But you could kill me just the same, couldn't you, Johnny? You'd swallow your feelings."

"I don't know. There's the other thing to think about too. That thing they call the instinct for self-preservation. It's a pretty strong instinct in me. That's how I've come as far as I have."

They drove on. She watched him in the glare of passing headlights, and could see that he was hurting inside, and she pitied him.

"Where are you taking me, Johnny?"

"Why don't you just sit back and enjoy the ride?"

"Is that what it is, Johnny, a ride? Or do they still call it that nowadays? Are you taking me for a ride?"

"Don't talk crazy," he said.

"Just answer the question, Johnny."

But he wouldn't answer. He sat hunched over the steering wheel, intent on the road ahead, refusing even to look at her. They were driving north. She didn't know their whereabouts. The area was completely unfamiliar to her. But she began to watch for the opportunity. They hadn't crossed the river yet, but sooner or later, if they kept going in this direction, they would inevitably come to it. So she waited, and was silent.

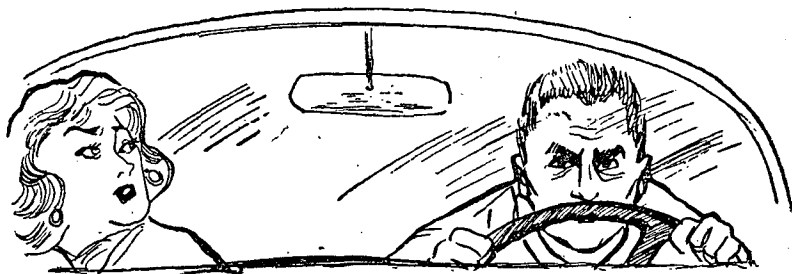
She still had her plan. The details would have to depend on circumstances, but the general intention was clear in her mind. And she hadn't abandoned it.

Quite suddenly, after what seemed miles, she saw it. The low, small bridge first, and then the river moving sluggishly under it, reflecting the opposite shore lights on its black surface.

They were approaching on the bridge road. Wasn't Johnny intending to drive across? No, he wasn't. At the last turn before they reached the bridge, he swerved the car to the left, heading down a dark street that followed the river. This was her chance, possibly her last chance. She kicked off her shoes, Diane's shoes.

"Stop the car!" she screamed.

He reacted as she'd been sure he would, obeying the startling command before he had a chance to



think. His foot pressed automatically on the brake, the car jolted and skidded to a shrieking stop.

She didn't hesitate, but had opened the door and was already running while the car still quivered. She ran to the bridge. There was a raised sidewalk for pedestrians just inside the railing. She raced up that sidewalk toward the center of the bridge. Johnny's pursuing footsteps sounded far behind her.

But he caught her, as she'd wanted him to catch her, before she reached the center. His hands grabbed at her shoulders, stopping her, then crushing her against the railing. For an instant they were close together in something almost like an embrace, both of them panting, their bodies in a kind of desperate communion.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked her savagely, pushing her a little away from him.

"I'm going back to the river."

"That's what I thought, you little fool."

"Would you rather kill me, Johnny, than have me kill myself?"

It was a question he couldn't answer immediately, and she took the opportunity to disentangle herself from his arms completely. When she spoke to him, she wasn't acting or pretending. The words were truthful, genuine.

"Why did you have to pull me out of the water in the first place, Johnny? So I could fall in love with you? That's not so strange, is it, a girl falling in love with a man who saved her life? And I didn't change my mind about you, Johnny, when I found out you killed Nick Tavener. He was your enemy. It was self-preservation when you killed him. It wasn't murder. It wasn't murder to me anyway. But then you were afraid, Johnny, afraid of me. I understood that, too, because you could never know how much I was in love with you, that I'd rather die myself than harm you. That's what I want to do, Johnny. I want to kill

myself so you won't be afraid any more. But I don't want you to kill me. Like you said, it wouldn't be like killing Nick Tavener. You'd never get over it. Because you've got a conscience too, Johnny, and I'd be on your conscience for the rest of your life. So let me do it myself, Johnny. We'll just go back to where we started, only this time you'll pass right by like you never saw me. Understand, darling? Oh darling Johnny, I love you so much."

Before he could reach for her, she leaped up onto the railing. Over the railing, and then she was falling. The distance wasn't far because it wasn't a high bridge, but it seemed an eternity before the water came up to meet her.

The impact, when she hit, knocked the air out of her lungs. As she knifed down into the black depths, she swallowed some water, and it terrified her into making the effort to paddle back up to the surface. She didn't know how to swim, the movement was primitively instinctive.

Then she felt the air again, and

breathed it in. And saw the sky, full of bright stars. And the head and shoulders of Johnny up there, as he leaned over the railing and stared down at her.

No, she wasn't going to call up to him. She wanted his reaction to be entirely his own. She'd proved her love for him. And she knew, deep in her woman's heart, that Johnny loved her. He'd only been afraid of the threat she'd held over him. But now she'd demonstrated that there was no threat. He could love her safely. This time, when he jumped in and rescued her, this time would have real meaning.

The stars were blotted out for a few seconds as the current swept Reva Renard under the bridge. When she emerged on the downstream side, Johnny was leaning over that railing too. His face gleamed white and pale in the starlight, but she couldn't read the expression on it.

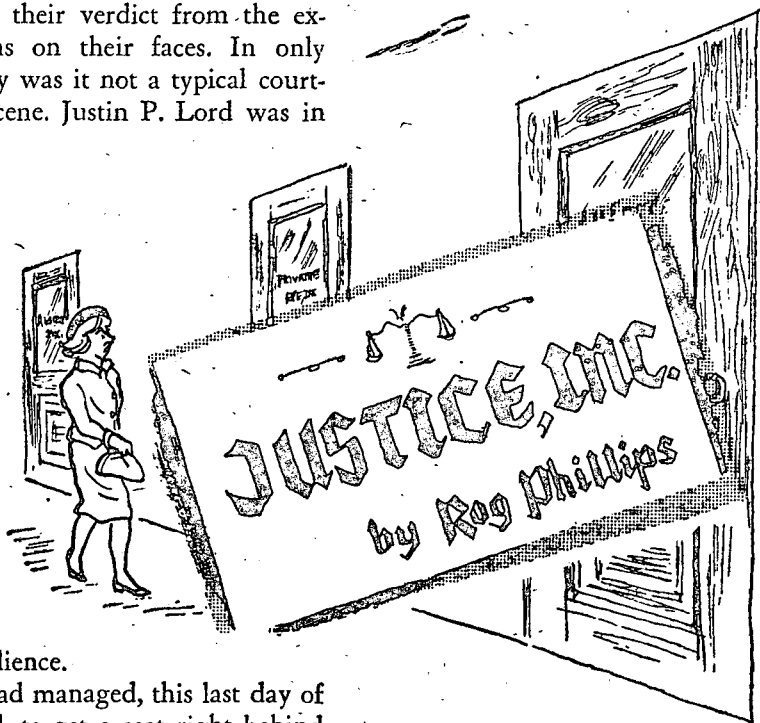
The current grew swifter. Johnny's face receded, became a mere speck, then invisible. There were only the stars. The water felt cold . . . but friendly.



Dissatisfaction with the slow, majestic march of courtroom procedures, and the results, is not uncommon among citizens. Most register their protests by writing letters to the editors. Mr. Justin P. Lord was made of sterner stuff.

It was a typical courtroom scene, with jurors filing in, everyone standing when the judge came from his chambers, the defendant staring at the jurors in an attempt to read their verdict from the expressions on their faces. In only one way was it not a typical courtroom scene. Justin P. Lord was in

eyes, owlishly magnified behind thick lensed glasses, darted in quick relish from the tense face of the defendant to the tense shoulders of the murder victim's wid-



the audience.

He had managed, this last day of the trial, to get a seat right behind the widow. A connoisseur in many fields, far from least of which was the criminal trial, his pale brown

ow, from the slightly worried expression of the defense lawyer to the confident expression of the prosecutor.

Already dismissed in Justin's thoughts was the outcome. He had known what it would be from the second day of the trial—and he had not been wrong in a hundred trials! He barely listened as the judge asked, "Has the jury reached a verdict?", and the jury foreman stood up and said, "We have, your honor."

"What is your verdict?" the judge asked, and Justin's finger hovered above the shoulder of the widow of the liquor store owner.

"We find the defendant not guilty," the jury foreman said, and Justin tapped the suddenly stiffened shoulder of the woman.

He had to tap her shoulder quite firmly, and several times, to get her attention. "Mrs. Clark!" he whispered in urgent tones.

She glanced around at him in annoyance, then turned her hate-filled eyes again toward the defendant who had just been freed.

"Mrs. Clark!" Justin wheedled. "This is most important. For both of us. Please take my card."

She turned, looked down at the small rectangle of white he held out, took it, and read it. She looked up at his magnified eyes with sudden interest.

"What does this mean, *Justice, Incorporated?*" she asked.

"Please! Not so loud!" Justin said. "You *are* interested in justice, aren't you?"

Fire flashed from the widow's eyes. "I certainly am!"

"Then should we go somewhere—and talk . . . ?" Justin murmured. He took out a spotless linen handkerchief and mopped his brow free of nervous perspiration.

"Let's," Mrs. Clark said grimly.

The cocktail lounge was nearly empty at three in the afternoon, so there was no difficulty in finding a table well away from anyone else. Mrs. Clark ordered an old-fashioned. Justin P. Lord ordered a *creme de menthe*. They studied each other while waiting for the drinks.

She was tall, large-boned, approaching forty, a typical wife of a typical successful liquor store owner who spent much of her time helping out in the store. Justin was short, small-boned but rather fleshy, with an expressive mouth. His hands were delicately formed.

Mrs. Clark shook her head. "You just don't look like a professional killer to me!" she said.

"Please!" Justin said—and the drinks came. After the waitress had gone he sipped his thimble of *creme de menthe* and added, "I have never killed anyone in my

life!" He shuddered and blinked.

Mrs. Clark drained half her old-fashioned in one gulp, then as it took effect she began to relax.

She chuckled.

"You know, Mr. Lord," she said, "I'm inclined to believe you. I think you would faint at the sight of blood!"

"Please!" Justin said. "Not at the table!"

"Why not?" Mrs. Clark said bitterly. "Blood-blood-blood! Does it make you sick? I saw my husband's blood soak out over his shirt onto my skirt while he was dying. I saw the man who did it—and back in that courtroom his lawyer tricked me into seeming stupid."

"Please," Justin said. "That is a lawyer's business. That is what he gets paid for."

"And what do you get paid for, Mr. Justin P. Lord?" Mrs. Clark asked, finishing her old-fashioned.

Justin twirled his stemmed liqueur glass with thoughtfulness.

"For many things, and in many ways," he said, "but never for murder. Never! He forced a smile. "Would you like another?"

"As long as you're buying, Justin," Mrs. Clark said.

Justin caught the waitress' eye and held up one finger, then pointed to Mrs. Clark's glass.

"But he will get murdered?"

Mrs. Clark said. "Well, won't he?"

"Oh yes," Justin said. "That's what you want, isn't it?"

"You're damned tootin'!" Mrs. Clark said. Her forehead wrinkled in perplexity. "But how . . . ?"

"There are many situations in which a man is bound to be murdered," Justin said. He smiled apologetically. "Perfectly legal situations. The person who creates the situation is violating no law."

"And you?" Mrs. Clark said.

Justin shrugged. "I am a specialist in creating situations. Like this present one, here in this cocktail lounge. Isn't it strange that twenty minutes ago you were in a courtroom waiting for a jury to return a verdict of 'Guilty' against the man who killed your husband—and now you are sitting here across the table from me, wondering how much money I will ask?"

The waitress came with the second drink for Mrs. Clark, who watched Justin pay for it and tip the girl a dollar. When the girl had gone, Mrs. Clark picked up the glass, looked into its depths of ice cubes and liquor and spices, and said, "All right, how much?"

"Ten thousand dollars," Justin said.

Mrs. Clark put her drink down and laughed. "Now I get it," she said. "I suppose you want five thousand now and the other five

later—only there won't be any later. You just take my five thousand and forget it."

"I was going to *try* for five thousand in advance," Justin said, unperturbed. "It isn't really necessary though. Just give me your word that when it's done you will pay me ten thousand."

Mrs. Clark gulped at her drink, watching Justin over the rim of the glass.

"What if I give my word—then don't pay you when it's done?" she asked.

"Oh, you'll pay," Justin said comfortably.

"What if I don't give my word?"

Justin shrugged. "My dear woman," he said, "I may be president of Justice, Incorporated, but I am not altruistic. In that case Michael Evan Birch, the murderer of your husband, is free to do what he pleases so far as I am concerned."

"All right, Justin," Mrs. Clark said, capitulating. "I'm convinced about you. I'll give you a five thousand advance and another five thousand when the job is done. How do you want the money. In small bills?"

"Your check will be fine," Justin said. "After all, we will have nothing to hide. I give you my word on that."

Mrs. Clark hesitated just a brief instant. "Okay," she said, fishing

her checkbook from her purse. "Do I make it out to Justice, Incorporated?"

"To me personally," Justin said. "In a sense I *AM* Justice, Incorporated."

His eyes blinked owlishly, watching her make out the check. And, sometime later, he blinked with equal owlishness at the suspicious features of the recent defendant half exposed by the narrow gap permitted by the night chain on the door of a cheap tenement apartment.

"Please, Mr. Birch, may I come in?" Justin wheedled. "I assure you it will be to our mutual advantage." He extended a small rectangle of white cardboard.

Mike Birch took the card and read it slowly, aloud. "Auditors, Incorporated," he read. "Tax refunds our specialty." Then his eyebrows shot up almost to his hair line. "*Michael Evan Birch, Field Representative?*"

"I took the liberty of having them printed up ahead of time," Justin apologized. "You see, I felt you would not refuse my offer."

"What offer?" Mike said.

Justin glanced down at the door chain.

"Oh. Sure, sure," Mike said, closing the door long enough to free the chain, then opening it wide. He glanced again at the busi-

ness card with his name on it as Field Representative.

Justin P. Lord glanced over the cheap furnishings of the apartment with distaste, selected a varnished kitchen chair, and sat on its edge.

"Haven't I seen you before?" Mike asked.

"At your trial," Justin said.

"Then why are you offering me a job?" Mike said. "Is this some kind of a trap?"

"A trap?" Justin said. He chuckled. "Even if you were guilty they could not try you again for the same crime. Everyone knows that. No, this is an opportunity. Pleasant work, two hundred and fifty dollars a week with substantial bonuses every month."

"What's the catch?" Mike asked.

"No 'catch' whatever," Justin said. "Let me explain. I employ a large staff of bookkeepers, auditors, and accountants. At times it is quite a problem to find enough work for them, so I hit on a plan. Many small businessmen don't know how to take advantage of all the loopholes in the tax laws. Half of them pay thousand of dollars too much in taxes every year. This is especially true in small communities unable to support a full fledged staff of qualified auditors."

"But I don't know anything about—" Mike said.

"You don't need to," Justin interrupted him. "As field man you simply make them an offer, which they can't resist. The client only has to turn his books of the past five years over to you, you send them to us, we go through the books, and if we can't save the client money it doesn't cost him a cent. If we can save him money, we get fifty percent. How can an honest businessman refuse an offer like that?"

"It sounds great," Mike said doubtfully.

"Also," Justin said, "we have another angle that will pay you substantial bonuses. Businessmen in small communities who bluntly turn down our generous offer usually do so because they have been cheating on their taxes. Part of your job will be to give us their names so that we can have the Internal Revenue Department investigate their books. We get five percent of what the Government can stick them for."

"And I get two fifty a week?" Mike said.

"Plus expenses," Justin said, taking his slim billfold from his inside breast pocket. "We will expect you to dress conservatively. Go to my tailor. He has instructions to dress you properly. I am advancing you two hundred dollars for living expenses for the time being,

until your suits are ready. This is Wednesday. You should be ready to go to work by Monday. Meanwhile, you are on the payroll." He stood up and went to the door.

"But *why*?" Mike blurted.

"Business," Justin said. "Purely business. I think you're the man for the job." He went out, closing the door gently.

Michael Evan Birch stood looking at the four crisp fifty dollar bills, the card of a very exclusive tailor, and the card with his own name imprinted.

The bedroom door, to one side of the room, opened, and the reason for the chain on the door entered. She came over and stared wonderingly at the fifty dollar bills.

"What a creep, Mike!" she said. "He made me shudder! I mean really! You aren't taking him up on it, are you, Baby?"

"And why not?" Mike said, stuffing the money and cards into his pocket. "It's a break. I never got a break before in my life. A good job, honest money—"

"But he's sick!" she said. "Couldn't you see it, Mike? Don't touch it. He's some kind of psycho, I swear it." She clutched at Mike's arm. "Let's go on as we were, Mike, with me casing the joints for you. Only one slipup in two years, and that was a plain fluke."

Mike shook his head. "Next time they could pin me," he said grimly. "Anyway, Leona, I'm going to check this out. You know why? It could be a sweet legitimate racket. I could learn the ropes, hire myself some bookkeepers, and go into business for myself." He grinned and snapped his fingers. "Why don't you go down to this Auditors Incorporated and get a job? That way you can learn it from the inside—and maybe keep track."

"Well," Leona hesitated. "All right. First thing in the morning."

"Good girl," Mike said, taking her in his arms. And in the hallway outside the door Justin P. Lord took his ear from the panel and departed with a smug smile of satisfaction.

Thursday morning, much to her surprise, Leona was hired at once, as a file clerk. She saw the door labeled, *PRIVATE, Justin P. Lord*; but the man who interviewed her was in his twenties and every inch a bookkeeper type.

"Who is Justin Lord?" Leona dared to ask.

"He's the owner of the company," her new boss said. "He's seldom in."

"Oh," Leona said.

Meanwhile Mike was submitting to the measurements of a balding pot bellied tailor with a Harvard

accent and his young assistant in a shop he would never have dared to enter otherwise, even to rob. He was consulted and outvoted on everything from sox to satchels.

He was told to come back Saturday, which he did. So he had a weekend to get used to his new wardrobe before Monday.

"Yes, sir!" Leona breathed in admiration. "Clothes *DO* make a man." She meant it—and for the first time began to think in terms of a home in the suburbs.

Mike took her places—and began thinking in terms of a mansion and a nice brunette for a wife. A girl from the society set.

On Monday morning at ten o'clock when Justin knocked on the door of Mike's apartment the door was opened immediately by a well groomed young man whom Justin found difficult to recognize.

"I could have come to your office, sir," Mike said.

"No, no," Justin said. "I much prefer that my field men don't." He put the brief case he was carrying on the table and opened it. Taking things out, he explained, "These are the contracts for clients to sign, these are the receipts you give them for their books for us to audit, these are the report sheets and envelopes you drop in the mail every day—and don't forget what I told you about reporting to us peo-

ple who violently refuse to do business with us. We actually make more money on tax evaders . . . And this is the map of your territory. As you see, it is the southwest quarter of the State. I've numbered the towns in the sequence in which I want you to take them."

Mike studied the map.

"Oh, by the way," Justin said, "you will use a company car. It's parked down in front. Here are the keys." He handed Mike a key ring.

"Thanks," Mike said, his eyes lighting up. "What kind of car is it?"

"A convertible, this year's," Justin said. "And I may as well confess to something right at the start."

"What's that?" Mike said.

"It isn't exactly a company car," Justin said. "It's owned by another of my companies. I find it more convenient to have one company own all my cars. It simplifies book-keeping."

"That sounds reasonable," Mike said with a wink. "What's the name of the company?"

Justin frowned. "I feel I'd better caution you on a point," he said. "Some of my field men have run into trouble. I'm really thinking of changing the ownership of the cars to another of my companies, but that—" Justin sighed. "—would re-

quire a lot of inter-corporation bookkeeping. The owner of the car is Private Eye, Incorporated—but if anyone asks you about that you must make it very plain you do not work for that company.”

“Why would anyone ask?” Mike said.

“The ownership card on the steering wheel shaft,” Justin said. “People—especially in small towns—are always very curious. Anyway, here are your credentials from Auditors, Incorporated, so you can prove what company you work for. Are you ready to leave? Is there anything else you would like to know?”

“I think I can handle it, sir,” Mike said. “The first stop is—” He consulted the map. “Left Fork, population eight fifty.”

“Good hunting, Michael,” Justin said, holding out his soft, cold hand for a firm handclasp. “I’ll walk down to the car with you. As a matter of fact, I’d be grateful if you’d drop me off at the office on your way out of town.”

Mrs. Clark waited patiently for five weeks, reading every page of each day’s papers in search of some notice of the death of her husband’s killer. Then she called the number on the business card of Justice, Inc. A female voice an-

swered, giving the firm names.

“I want to speak to Mr. Lord,” Mrs. Clark said.

“Who’s calling, please?” the girl asked.

“Mrs. Clark,” Mrs. Clark said.

There were several seconds of silence, then the girl said, “Oh yes. In relation to the case of Michael Evan Birch. Mr. Lord will be in touch with you when the matter is closed. Please be patient.”

“I want to talk to Justin,” Mrs. Clark said doggedly.

“I’m sorry, he isn’t in,” the girl said.

“Who are you?” Mrs. Clark asked bluntly.

“I’m his secretary, Miss Higgins,” the girl said. “I know how impatient you must be, but these things take time.” She sounded most sympathetic.

Frustrated, Mrs. Clark hung up. Also she was somewhat amazed. The little man with the owlish eyes had a secretary who kept a card index on his “cases”! A Miss Higgins! How macabre!

Mrs. Clark waited another two weeks, reading the papers all the way through, every day. Then she could wait no longer. “Miss Higgins,” she said on the phone. “Mr. Lord had better see me. I’m coming right to his office now, and he’d better be there.”

“I will try to get your message to

him, Mrs. Clark," Miss Higgins replied. "He's in court and will be until noon."

"In court?" Mrs. Clark said in surprise.

"Yes," Miss Higgins said. "The State versus Frederic Jones."

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Clark said. "He's the one arrested for the killing of those three women. I could catch Mr. Lord at the courtroom."

"No, I'm sure he would prefer to see you here in the office," Miss Higgins replied. "If you could be here by one?"

"Certainly," Mrs. Clark said. And she could hardly wait! She was very curious about this Miss Higgins, and about an office of Justice, Inc. In the back of her mind she had never believed there was an office for that sort of thing. A professional killer with an office! But of course, Justin had explained he didn't kill, he merely set up a situation where someone else would do the dirty work. And right now Justin was in court, listening to another trial, with his eye on a new client!

Then the memory of seven weeks of waiting for results came back, and she compressed her lips with determination. Her lips were still compressed with determination when she got off the elevator at two minutes to one and strode past several doors with AUDI-

TORS, Inc., on them, turned the corner and went past the door with PRIVATE EYE, Inc., on it, and came to the door with JUSTICE, Inc., on it. So there really was an office! She pushed open the door and went inside.

Immediately she wished she hadn't. It wasn't the secretary sitting behind the desk in the corner. Miss Higgins was a surprise, yes. She was a very healthy-looking young lady, strikingly beautiful, and nothing at all like the image Mrs. Clark had built up in her mind of a hunchbacked old spinster in faded clothes.

No, it was the other people in the room, sitting in attitudes of waiting, reading outdated copies of magazines. One was a young mother with a four-year-old girl on her lap. One was an old man in his seventies. It might have been a doctor's waiting room—except that on the door against the far wall was printed, JUSTIN P. LORD, PRIVATE.

Miss Higgins had fixed her eyes on her questioningly, so Mrs. Clark took a firmer grasp on her purse and went up to the desk. "I'm Mrs. Clark," she said belligerently. "I called you."

"Oh yes, Mrs. Clark," Miss Higgins said. "Mr. Lord will see you in just a few moments. Will you please be seated?"

Mrs. Clark sat, and covertly studied those around her. A professional killer with a beautiful secretary and a clientele that waited their turns in a waiting room equipped with old magazines? Mrs. Clark wondered if perhaps she might be going mad.

She did not have long to wait. A quiet buzzer sounded and Miss Higgins said, "Mrs. Clark?" Mrs. Clark stood up, feeling the eyes of everyone watching her, and went to the door to the inner office. (At least she had not had to wait her turn!) (But why would that woman with a small daughter be hiring a professional killer?)

Inside, Justin P. Lord stood up, a cigarette holder with a long, freshly lit cigarette in his mouth.

"Ah," he said. "Mrs. Clark. Miss Higgins tells me you have been growing impatient. Please sit down."

"You're darn right I'm impatient," Mrs. Clark said. "I paid you five thousand dollars. Almost two months have gone by. I want some results."

Justin resumed his place behind the desk. His expression became unhappy.

"All we can do is wait," he said.

"Look," Mrs. Clark said curtly. "I paid you five thousand bucks to have the murderer of my husband killed. Are you going to have it

done or not? I want an answer."

"I have set up the situation," Justin said unhappily. "It's inevitable. All we can do is wait."

"What situation?" Mrs. Clark sneered.

Justin puffed on his cigarette delicately, frowning.

"I suppose it would do no harm to explain," he said, opening a file folder in front of him and taking out a small map, and extending it across the desk to her. It was a map of the southwest quarter of the State. "Michael Evan Birch is now employed as a field man by Auditors, Incorporated, in this map area. He goes from businessman to businessman with an offer to audit their books for nothing. The apple he holds out is that if his company finds a way to get a substantial refund, Auditors, Incorporated gets fifty percent. He also reports those who refuse, and within a week the Internal Revenue Bureau starts investigating those who turned down the offer. That situation alone has possibilities of murder, but there is more to it."

"Yes?" Mrs. Clark said, staring at the map.

"He is driving a car whose ownership, on the white card on the steering post, is a detective agency. In every town he visits he is forced to explain he does not work for the

detective agency. Naturally the rumor spreads that he IS a detective, and that his tax business is only a front. That adds another element that might make someone murder him, don't you think?"

"I don't know . . ." Mrs. Clark said.

"In addition," Justin went on eagerly, "I have an operative who follows him from town to town and starts the rumor that he is a famous detective who is on the track of a killer that has hidden out and established himself as a respected citizen." Justin jabbed at the map with his finger. "Surely there must be at least ONE murderer who has hidden out in this area, and who will murder Michael to keep his identity safe!" He leaned back in his chair and pouted, his magnified eyes blinking.

Mrs. Clark studied the map. "Where is Birch now?" she asked.

"In Maple Corners," Justin said. "As you can see on the map, I have the towns numbered in the sequence he will visit them. Maple Corners is fifty-seven, Eden Valley is fifty-eight. He will go there next. Don't you see?" Justin spread his pudgy hand over the map. "Somewhere in this area he will be murdered!"

Mrs. Clark hesitated, then nodded. "It does sound reasonable," she said. She stood up.

"Then you'll be patient?" Justin said. "I am so glad! Please, the exit is this way." He opened another door than the one she had come in through.

"I'll pay you the other five thousand when he's dead," Mrs. Clark said. There was a quiet smile on her lips as she departed. The quiet smile was still there an hour later as she headed out of town on the highway that would take her to Maple Corners, two hundred and fifty miles distant. She had stopped at home only long enough to put a small but deadly automatic pistol in her purse.

On the way back from Maple Corners Mrs. Clark marveled at how easy it was to murder someone. She had arrived shortly after six, and had dinner in the hotel restaurant. Birch—though she had hardly recognized him in his tailored clothes and air of confident respectability—had come into the restaurant shortly after her.

He hadn't even noticed her. Maybe he wouldn't have remembered her if he had looked at her. When it seemed he was ready to leave she had left a moment before him, and powdered her nose in the hotel lobby to give him time to start up the stairs. She had followed him boldly, as though she

were a resident of the hotel. She had followed him down the hall, and when he unlocked the door to his room she had simply followed him in, taking the gun from her purse.

One bullet had done it. Oh, he had known who she was and why he was dying, those seconds before she fired. The sound of the shot had been deafening inside the room, but in the hall there was no milling crowd wondering about the shot, and downstairs the desk clerk did not bother to look up from the newspaper he was reading as she crossed the lobby and left the hotel. Contrary to popular belief, people had NOT instantly identified the sharp report as a shot, and made note of her movements so they could identify her later in court. There had not even been sirens as police rushed to the scene of the crime. Maple Corners was a sleepy town. It was doubtful that even the waitress in the hotel restaurant had *really* looked at her.

A hundred miles from Maple Corners there was a small lake. Mrs. Clark had made a mental note of, on her way downstate. She stopped there on her way back and tossed the gun as far as she could throw it, out into the deep water. It was a dirty lake, filled with algae and cat tails, with undoubtedly several feet of loose silt

on the bottom. Even if she confessed to her crime and told the police where the gun was, they probably would be unable to find it.

She arrived home shortly after midnight, half expecting the police to be waiting for her. There was no one. It was almost disappointing.

She took barbiturates and slept until noon the next day. She was awakened by the ringing of the telephone.

The memory of last night flooded into her waking mind. Filled with dread, she listened to the phone ring, then finally answered it. The voice at the other end was that of Justin.

"What?" she said, putting shocked surprise into her voice.

"Yes!" Justin said, chuckling. "It's true. He was shot last night! The hotel maid found his body this morning! It's in all the papers. On one of the back pages, of course—but it's there!"

"I'll check," she said. "If it's true, I owe you another five thousand dollars." She was fully awake now, and her expression softened. She felt sorry for this pitiable and ineffective little man. "I could mail you the check," she said, "but—why don't we celebrate? Suppose I meet you where we had cocktails? Say, three o'clock?"

A brisk shower and three cups of strong coffee restored her to life. She forged out into the daytime world and bought a newspaper and had a two o'clock breakfast at a small cafe while reading it.

On the front page was the news that Frederic Jones had been found guilty of murdering the three women and sentenced to death. Well, that lost Justin a possible client. On page three was the report of the murder of Michael Evan Birch, in downstate Maple Corners. No clues to the murder had been found so far.

Promptly at three o'clock Mrs. Clark went into the cocktail lounge. Justin was already there, sitting at a table well removed from other customers. She went over and sat down opposite him, and without fuss handed him the check for five thousand dollars she had already made out.

Justin glanced at it with his magnified eyes and smiled in gratitude. "Thank you," he said, his voice purring. "I have already taken the liberty of ordering you an oldfashioned."

"And you a creme de menthe?" Mrs. Clark said.

"No," Justin said. "Today is special. I have ordered a martini."

"Special?" Mrs. Clark said. "Why? Frederic Jones was found guilty—so you lose a client there.

"On the contrary," Justin said.

He was silent while the waitress came with the drinks.

"You see," he went on when they were alone, "Fred is innocent. Unfortunately, the only way to prove his innocence now is to find the guilty party. The police have closed the case, so . . ."

"How do you know he's innocent?" Mrs. Clark asked, gulping half her drink.

"I watched the entire trial and formed my own judgment," Justin said with some dignity. "So I have persuaded Fred to engage my detective agency to find the real killer."

"Your detective agency?" Mrs. Clark said.

"Private Eye, Incorporated," Justin said smugly.

Mrs. Clark finished her drink in a deep gulp. Justin caught the eyes of the waitress and held up one finger, then pointed to his companion's glass.

"I've been meaning to ask you, Justin," Mrs. Clark said, "who were those people waiting in your office? That old man, for example, and that young mother with a four year old girl?"

"Oh yes," Justin said, nodding. "The old man is Joe Travelini, an old character actor. He often does odd jobs for me. I keep him in living expenses. The woman with

the daughter? She's Mrs. Hathaway. Her husband is in the big house. Guilty? Yes, but she wasn't. So I help her out. In fact—" He pointed to Mrs. Clark's check on the tablecloth. "This will go a long way toward that. You see, I pretend to give her assignments, such as sitting in the lobby of a hotel with her little daughter watching for a suspect; but they are always idle assignments. I pay her ten dollars an hour when she works, and see that she gets at least six hours a week in. When she really needs it and I can afford it, I give her ten hours a week."

Mrs. Clark's second drink came. She gulped half of it, gripping the glass with both hands, so they wouldn't tremble.

"Justin," she said, setting the glass down slowly.

"Yes, Mrs. Clark?" Justin said, sipping his martini, his owlish eyes blinking at her.

"Will you marry me, Justin?" Mrs. Clark said.

She gripped her oldfashioned until her knuckles whitened, with

her soul in her eyes, while Justin's enlarged eyes blinked back at her mildly, in surprise.

"Mrs. Clark," Justin said gently, with a tone of deep regret in his voice, "I'm flattered, naturally, but I am already married."

Mrs. Clark studied him shrewdly for a moment.

"I think you're lying," she said, "but an expert at creating situations would also be an expert at getting out of them." She smiled—too brightly—hiding her sudden loneliness. Then, in a gesture of bravado, she held up her glass and said, "Cheers!"

She drained the glass, put it down, picked up her purse, hesitated as though she were about to say something, then stood up and headed toward the front doors of the cocktail lounge.

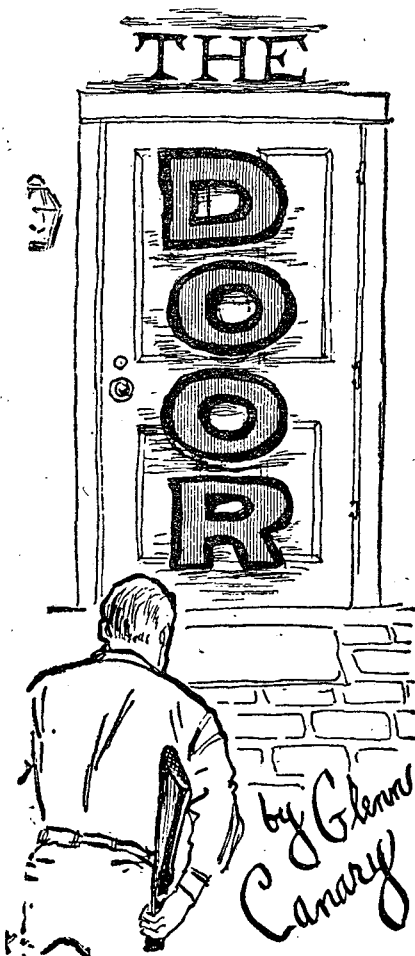
Justin watched her, making no move to call her back. When the doors had closed on her, an expression of distaste appeared on his face. His eyes were fixed.

In tones of shocked horror he said, "Me? Marry a murderess?"

Every Thursday

The new television show, ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS, is one hour long, and can be seen on Thursday evenings, at 10 PM, on the CBS network.

No one will dispute the fact that there are several varieties of courage . . . physical, moral, and last but not least, just plain downright foolhardy. I myself have always believed in cautious behaviour, and in letting sleeping dogs lie.



I SUSPECTED that the cold beer would only be lukewarm, but the interior of the bar was dark and cool and the sun outside made the sidewalk hot enough to burn my feet through the army shoes I was wearing, so I went inside and perched on a stool and ordered a glass of draft.

I lit a cigarette while I waited for the bartender to get my drink. Reflected in the mirror behind the bar was Sergeant Ben Davis. He was sitting at a table near the pin-ball machine in the corner. There was a glass of beer in front of him and he was fingering some coins that lay on the table.

I took my beer and went over to sit with him. He looked up at me and nodded. "Corporal," he said.

"Sergeant."

"It's a hot day."

"Very."

He looked at me. "You're a sloppy soldier, Corporal."

"I wouldn't doubt it."

"You are a sloppy soldier," he said slowly.

"I am a hot soldier on a three

day pass," I said. "It also is too hot to look for girls and I'm too broke to go home. Therefore, I intend to get even sloppier as I get drunk on warm beer in this damn ugly town."

"Button your tie."

"Go to hell."

He leaned back and looked at me. It seemed he was peering out the bottoms of his eyeballs. "You may make a sergeant yet," he said. "You know when to disregard an order." He took a long swallow from his glass of beer. "A good soldier always knows when to disregard an order."

"You think that's what a good soldier should know, do you?"

"I know it."

"Buy me another beer."

He waved to the bartender and held up two thick fingers. I could see beads of sweat on his forehead and by that I knew he had been drinking for a long time before I arrived.

The bartender brought two fresh glasses and took away the empty ones. Davis took a swallow and held it in his mouth for a few seconds before letting it go down his throat.

"I want to ask you something," he said.

"Go ahead."

"You went to college, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And you read a lot of stuff like philosophy. I mean, if there was some question, you could answer it."

"I don't know. It depends on the question."

"I mean a philosophical question about something a man did once."

"I still don't know. I'd have to hear the question."

He leaned over toward me. "I think I'm a coward," he said.

I laughed. "Sure," I said. "That's why you have the Silver Star."

"I mean it. I think I'm a coward and I want you to tell me."

"No," I said. "I don't think you're a coward."

"You haven't heard the story. Wait till you hear what happened and then tell me."

"I was just a guy," he said. "You know, just an ordinary kid who grew up in a town called Massillon in Ohio. I graduated from Washington High School there and I played some football because all the guys there did who were as big as me. After I graduated, I got some college offers to play ball, but I didn't want to go to college. What would I have done there? All my life I wanted to be a mechanic. I'm not a guy who thinks you got to go to college to make something

of yourself. I wanted to get my own garage and work with cars. I always liked machines.

Anyway, that's what I started out to do. After I got out of school, I got a job in a garage in Massillon so I could really learn my trade.

I used to be down to that damn garage at six in the morning and I wasn't supposed to start to work until eight, but I wanted to learn. I did everything they told me to do and then I would hang around the older guys, just watching, until they started letting me do things that a kid wasn't supposed to be doing. But I could handle it. When I put a car back together, it was better than ever. I could really make an engine sound nice.

I saved my money, too. There was just me and my mother then and I lived at home. I didn't mess with girls much so I didn't have to spend money there. All I did was pay Mom for my room and board and save out a little for a movie once in a while. I didn't even own a car because I didn't want to spend the money. I wanted to get enough together as soon as I could to open my own place. I figured it was going to take a while, but it was going to take a while before I'd learn enough to run my own place. So it would have worked out about even, I thought.

Then I met Sandra. I was barely

nineteen and she was only eighteen. She was little, small bones, and blonde, and pretty. I met her when she brought her father's car in to get it serviced. He was an insurance salesman in town and he owned a big fancy car. She looked like she belonged in that car.

She smiled at me when I went over to her and I smiled back without even thinking about what I was doing. We talked about the car and she asked me my name. I told her and she said she had seen me play football a couple years back.

When she left, she said, "Why don't you call me up sometime?"

"I'd like that," I said.

"So would I." Then she took off in that big car. I stood at the doors and watched her go. At the corner, she stopped at a red light and she turned and looked back at me and waved.

I called her the next night. I figured maybe she was just being nice, but I thought the worst that could happen would be she would say she wouldn't go out with me. So I called her up. She said she would go out with me that night even.

I borrowed a car from Sam down at the garage and went to pick her up. When she came out, she was wearing a white dress and

her hair was down around her shoulders.

I took her to the Stark Drive-In Theater because that was where she said she wanted to go, but I was determined that I was going to be a gentleman.

I was a gentleman, too, only she was closer to tigercat than lady. Halfway through the picture, she curled up beside me and turned up her face so that I didn't have a choice but to kiss her.

By the time I got her home that night, I had decided that this was a girl I had to have.

But it wasn't that easy. She was willing to go out with me any time I called her, provided she didn't have another date. But she wouldn't stop going out with other guys for me. I didn't date any other girls. Hell, there weren't any other girls as far as I was concerned.

There was one night when I tried to tell her how I felt about her, but words like that don't come natural to me and I got all embarrassed.

"What are you trying to say?" she asked me.

"I want you to go steady."

She began to laugh. "I like you, Ben baby, but don't try to tie me down," she said. But her hands were shaking.

That's the way she was, skittish,

as if she were afraid to let me think I was important to her. I used to get so frustrated my stomach would turn over and one night I broke a bone in my hand pounding the wall in my room. That's the way it was.

But I was so afraid of losing her altogether that I never did hunt up some of her other boy friends and punch them in the mouth. I wanted to. God, how I wanted to. I don't blame them now, but then I had to have somebody to hate and I loved her, so I hated them, all the other guys she went out with. But I never did do anything. I was afraid she wouldn't see me anymore if I got rough.

But I didn't give up. I called her every day. I took her out as often as my pay would allow. I bought her things. She was smarter than me so I even tried to read some books so I could talk to her about things.

And somewhere, maybe I came up with the idea myself, maybe I read it somewhere—I don't remember—but someplace I got the idea that loving someone is wanting the other person to love you.

You understand that? Love is that simple. You want the other person to love you. Naturally, if she loves you, then she wants you to love her too. That's why lovers are so good to each other. That's

where jealousy comes from. You want the other person to love you so she will want you to love her.

It sounds funny maybe to hear a man like me talking about love that way. I'm a rough guy. But I loved her with tenderness. I only wanted to be good to her and to take care of her.

So I proposed to her. We had been swimming on a Saturday afternoon and then we were driving around, just cruising because she seemed to like to do that, and all of a sudden I said, "Hey, let's go and get married tonight."

"We can't," she said.

"Why not?"

"We'd have to wait three days."

"If she had said she didn't want to get married, I'd have tried to pass it off as a joke, but she only made me think she didn't want to wait.

I kicked that car up and we crossed the state line just before midnight. We were married there at one in the morning and we spent our wedding night in the fanciest motel I could find.

The next morning I called the garage and told them what I had done and the boss gave me three days off for a honeymoon. We didn't go anywhere special in that three days, we just drove around, but she seemed happy, quiet and contented.

We had a little trouble with her parents when we got back. Her mother was screaming and yelling about getting it annulled, but I talked to Sandra's father and told him what I did for a living and about how I was saving for my own place and I guess I convinced him I wasn't too bad a guy. At least he calmed his wife down. They let us alone after that.

Everything was fine for the first six months we were married. Sandra seemed to like the little house I rented for us and she made a real good wife, you know? She didn't cook very well, but she tried and she was getting better all the time. We were happy.

Then she started getting restless at night. I'd come home from work and she would want to go out some place or she'd want to call up some people and have a party. I didn't like that. I didn't mind some of that kind of life, but I didn't want it all the time.

She started going out at night, too. I don't mean she was hanging around bars or anything, but she started going to movies and stuff and she always seemed to have a girl friend to go with.

You know how long it takes a man to get the idea that maybe his wife is going out with another man? It took me almost a year. I don't remember what gave me the

idea in the first place, but once it started it wouldn't let go. I got so I couldn't think about anything else. She'd be gone and I would sit by the window and look out, watching for the car, thinking, and by the time she got home I'd be ready to kill someone. Only I didn't know who he was.

But that last night, I remember that one. She asked me at dinner if I'd mind if she went to a movie. I didn't want her to go, but I couldn't say that to her any more than I could ask her if she was playing around. I guess I was still afraid to find out the answer still scared she would leave me. I said I didn't mind if she went out. I told her I was tired and would just take a nap until she got back.

But I watched her. She made some mistakes. When she took a bath to get ready, she shaved her legs. A woman doesn't do that to go to a movie with another woman. She took all of her makeup with her in a special little bag which she stuck in her purse. She didn't usually do that either.

And she made one big mistake. She didn't know what the movie was about and I did. I had made a pot of coffee while I waited for her and I had her sit down and I had her tell me what she saw at the movies.

I had read a review of that movie

and she, of course, had not seen it.

"All right," I said, "tell me who he is."

She looked scared for a minute and then she laughed. "I always told you not to try to tie me down," she said.

"Tell me."

"Sam Garner."

I knew him. I had gone to high school with him. "Why did you marry me?" I asked.

"Because I loved you."

"I suppose you still do?"

"Yes."

"And what about Garner?"

She looked down at the table and then she looked up with a twisted, 'funny kind' of smile on her face. "I told you not to try to tie me down," she said.

I walked back to the bedroom and got my shotgun out of the closet. I loaded it and went back into the kitchen. When she saw the gun, she laughed out loud.

"You don't have guts enough to use that on me," she said.

"Not on you, on Sam."

"You don't have guts enough for that either."

"Yes, I do."

She got real still and then she said, "Ben, I love you."

"Sure," I said. "I'll be back to talk about it just as soon as I kill your lover."

"I can't let you kill him."

"Why? Do you love him, too?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know. Ben."

I passed her and went to the door. I turned there and looked back at her. She was standing, stiff, staring at me. "Listen," I said. "Just in case you haven't thought of it. You can call him and tell him I'm coming. He's better with guns than I am. He's a better shot and it would be self defense if he killed me. I can go up there and I can kill him and I can come back and no one will ever know. Or you can call him and he'll kill me."

I turned around and walked out. I got in my car and I drove to Sam Garner's house.

I drove to the back and stopped. There was a light on in the front of the house, but the back was dark. I got out of the car, holding my gun.

I walked up to the door of the house, just an ordinary door. I looked at it and then I walked away. I put my gun in the back of the car.

I sold the car in the morning in Cleveland. And I enlisted in the Army that afternoon. I never went back to see Sandra. I guess she's divorced me a long time ago."

The sergeant stopped talking. I waved for two more beers. "That's

all?" I said, sensing an omission.

"That's all. It's been bothering me ever since."

"What?"

"I didn't have guts enough to knock on that door. I wasn't afraid of getting shot. But I didn't have courage enough to take a chance that I might live for just a few seconds knowing that she thought so little of me she called Sam Garner and got me killed."

"Maybe she didn't call him," I said.

"Maybe." He looked down at the table and shook his head. "I didn't have guts enough to find out." He stretched one hand out flat on the table and stared at it. "Am I a coward?" he said.

"I don't know," I answered. "But maybe Sandra's still waiting for you to come back."

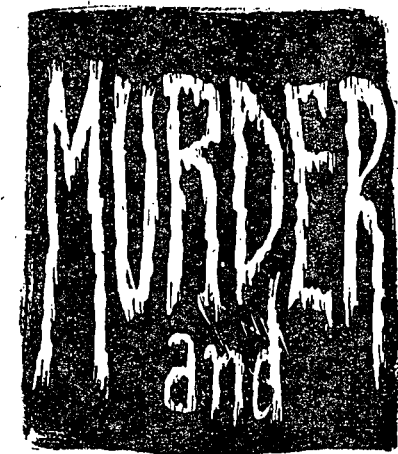
"Maybe," he said. "But I'm afraid to find out."

"Well, you might as well forget it then."

"I can't," he said. "But you know something funny? I ran into Sam Garner about a year ago in San Francisco and I told him about it. I told him I wasn't mad any more, but I had to know whether she had called. And you know what? That was the night of the week he always went bowling, so he wasn't even home that night. Isn't that a hell of a thing?"

LARKSFIELD was a small town on the outskirts of a large Eastern city. Small and quiet, with some light industry and a scattering of old two-family houses and one or two new housing projects and a large modern shopping center, it did not look like anything out of the ordinary, was not out of the ordinary, but Danny South had driven clear across the continent, all the way from his beloved Hollywood, to come here. Before that, he had spent six months in research and in correspondence with various people around the country before he knew he would have to come to this place. Anonymity was often a difficult screen to pierce, yet it was still not easy for a person to disappear completely, evading persistent search and diligent inquiry.

Danny motored slowly in his convertible down the main street which burned bright and hot in the midday sun, glancing right and left with a vague, abstract curiosity. For the first time in six months he felt the luxury of a relaxed and unquesting mind, even though what was still to come was going to be the most difficult part of the whole plan. But at least he knew he had found her, that he was finally in the same town with her, that one of these obscure women who were moving in and out of the shopping center and along the



streets might even be she, the one.

Darla McVey would not be easy to pick out of a crowd anymore. Danny had not seen her since she had left Hollywood at the height of a storybook screen career fifteen years ago, without explanation to anyone. She had, in fact, walked out in the middle of a picture, leaving the sound stage one evening and never coming back, and the company had been obliged to scrap an expensive production. There had been explosive headlines, of course, in newspapers all over the country. Theory and speculation ran rampant. There were those who said it was all a publicity stunt. From the first moment Danny had known it was more than that. Then, after a few weeks, people began wondering whether her

Have you ever tried to disappear . . . to resign from the human race for even a brief time? Or, for that matter, to avoid a creditor? If so, you know how incredibly difficult it is, even though one may be innocent of any wrongdoing, to avoid one's inquisitive fellow man.

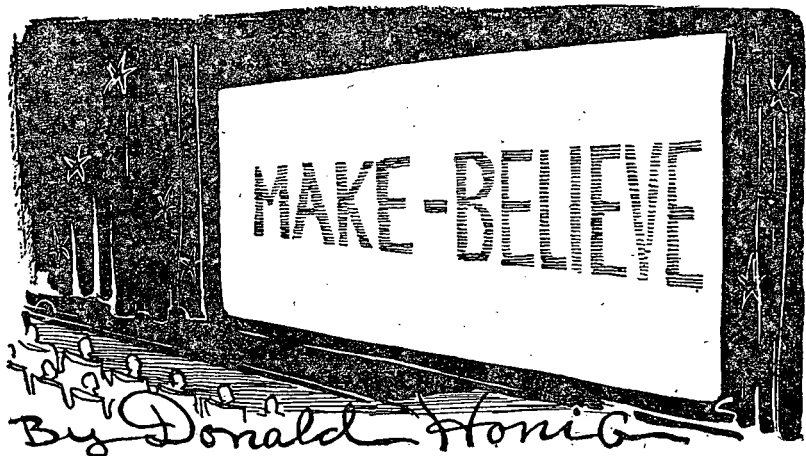


disappearance was due to foul play. It was at this point that Darla McVey came forward in what was to be her last public appearance, and gave her public statement.

She appeared quite abruptly and unannounced in a Los Angeles police station to say that she had left public life by her own decision, was doing it for personal reasons, had not been threatened or coerced by anyone, but merely wanted to retire and be left alone. Before studio officials could descend upon the police station she had disappeared once more. The studio delegation, led by the production head, J. J.

Millerman himself, demanded that the police tell them where Miss McVey had gone. But the police could give no information . . . she had given them none. There had been no reason for holding her, the captain explained, and she had walked out, leaving the police quite satisfied with her explanation. Incensed, J. J. created a stormy scene, accused the police of withholding information, and then left, his followers at his heels. That was the last time Darla McVey, the actress, was ever seen, as far as the general public knew.

But Danny South was going to



see her soon. She was here, in Parksville. It was the seventh home she had established since leaving Hollywood. He had tracked her (through friends, relatives, private detectives) from Hollywood to Denver to Chicago to New York and then through the small towns to, finally, Parksville. No one knew her as Darla McVey, of course. She was Mrs. Starbuck now, though not married; she had never married, as far as Danny knew. 'Starbuck', Danny thought moodily as he parked his car in the shopping center's lot. He wondered if there was a Freudian significance in the name: Star. Possibly. Darla had always been an odd, rather introspective girl, a cut above the average in sensitivity.

'I wonder if she'll remember me,' Danny thought. He had been doing publicity for the studio at the time of the great runout. He had met Darla several times at those riotous parties which she hated but had to attend. In fact they had both been there that night when that dippy young starlet Audrey Elliott had somehow gone out of an eighth story window of a Los Angeles hotel to her screaming death on the pavements. Quite a night, that. Danny could still remember J. J. rushing from that bedroom, feverish and disheveled (the way you just *never* saw J. J.)

and running flush into him and J. J. blurting, "I wasn't in there. You didn't see me coming out," and hurrying away. Going into the room from which Audrey had swan-dived, Danny found Darla standing in a state of shock. "Save the emotion for the camera," Danny said. Then Darla had fainted.

He had been a brash young fellow then. Now he was a brash older one. Once upon a time he was going to write an exposé novel about Hollywood, but now he could smirk at his own naïveté and ambition, since he was now one of those loathsome people he once wanted to write about. The hacks who ground out B-pictures talked about writing novels, while they starved on their occasional pay checks and choked on their serious ideas . . . while Danny was earning a high five-figure yearly income writing "inside" stories for the slick magazines about Hollywood and the screen set. (But despite his yearly five figures Danny had less in the bank than most of those B-writers, thanks to tardy racehorses and the hellish proximity of Vegas).

Leaving the car in the shopping center lot, he found a bar and went in and ordered a bourbon on the rocks. The place was empty except for himself and the bartender.

"Say, bud," Danny said, inclining

his head to draw the bartender. "Where can a fellow find accommodations in this average American town?"

"There's a hotel about six blocks down," the bartender said. "Planning to stay long?"

"It depends," Danny said. "It depends."

"Salesman?"

"Writer," Danny said. "Big shot writer from Hollywood. I know all the secrets and all the scandals. But don't ask me if it's true about so-and-so because I won't tell. I get paid big money for telling."

The bartender looked dubiously at him.

"Everybody is a big shot," the bartender said wearily, walking away.

Wrong place to ask for information anyway, Danny thought. Darla would not be known to bartenders. She hated to drink, hated public places. He would probably find her feeding squirrels in the park or reading old novels in the library.

Danny took a room in the Parksfeld Hotel. There he set up his portable typewriter, unpacked his bags and then showered and shaved and went out to dinner. After dinner he strolled about Parksfeld, inspecting the town with condescension. It was a Saturday night movie or square dance

town, Sunday church and Monday work. Plodding Americana. As a stranger, he was cautiously appraised. He nodded at a few attractive young ladies and was coolly ignored.

The following morning (after spending the night with a bottle of bourbon and falling asleep in a smiling stupor) he set out to find Darla. The Parksfeld telephone directory listed no Mrs. Starbuck, nor had he expected it to; that would have been too easy. How did you find somebody who was living nearby without asking too many questions? Doubtless one of the B-writers could have worked it out quite easily (on the typewriter). But this was no movie script, this was serious business. There was money involved, a lot of money.

He went to the post office and asked where he might locate a friend he knew was living in Parksfeld. They directed him to the City Hall. 'Should have thought of that myself,' Danny said as he walked across the town square to the stern gray Doric-columned City Hall. There, after making several inquiries, he obtained the address of Mrs. E. Starbuck.

Danny asked for directions, and left the building. He walked through a fine residential neigh-

borhood, into one where the houses were clustered together and were less elegant. The street dipped and he went down-hill into an industrial neighborhood. He stopped there and wondered if he was going in the right direction. A garage attendant assured him he was, and he went on, wishing he had taken his car.

Finally he came to several shabby buildings huddled together. A *Rooms* sign hung out from one of them. The number on this house was the number that had been given to him. As he stepped into the musty malodorous doorway under the number he could not help remembering Darla's Hollywood house, a beautiful white mansion on a hill, shaded with palm trees, with white stucco guest houses and an immense green lawn.

He shuddered as he looked at the names on the bells. There it was: E. Starbuck. 'I don't believe it,' he thought. 'But it must be true.' He went up the staircase to the first floor landing. He had no idea in which room she lived, so he tapped on the first door he saw. It was opened by an agitated looking little man who peered up at him with distrustful eyes.

"Excuse me, brother," Danny said, "but I'm looking for Mrs. Starbuck's room. Could you point me in the right direction?"

"Mrs. Starbuck you say?" the little man said.

"That's what I said."

"You don't mean Mrs. Starbuck, you mean Darla McVey."

"Who?" Danny asked, unable to disguise his astonishment. Her identity was supposed to be such a secret, and here even the village idiot knew who she was.

The little man smiled benignly.

"She denies it, of course," he said. "But the resemblance . . . of course everyone laughs at me . . . the resemblance is striking. She never grew old. Still beautiful, like in the pictures. People laugh at me and say what does Darla McVey want to be living here for? Come in and I'll show you something," the man said opening the door wide.

Danny sighed and went in. Inside, he was astonished again. The room was a veritable shrine to the glory of Darla McVey. The wall was covered with pictures of the young beauty. It gave Danny a twinge of nostalgia to see the lovely young face with the wistful smile, all around him. Some of the pictures were glossy still shots which the little man had evidently badgered out of the studio, others had been clipped from old fan magazines and Sunday supplements. Some of the glossy shots stood in gilt-edged frames on the

bureau, arranged symmetrically.

"Isn't she lovely," the little man said quietly, pridefully.

"Lovely indeed," Danny said.

"This one," the little man said going up to one of the pictures on the wall, "is from my favorite picture, though I was upset with the ending. Do you remember *Empty Arms*? That's the one where in the end that fellow takes her into the woods and strangles her just as her lover rushes up to save her, but is two seconds late. But he kills the murderer with a jack-knife, stabs him three times," the little man said grimly, "then kneels and kisses his dead love. I've seen it twelve times. Do you remember that one?"

"Sure," Danny said. In fact, he had written the publicity releases on that one. "But I want to see Mrs. Starbuck, Jack."

"My name is not Jack. My name is Sam Jaspers," the little man said, a trifle offended. "I was once a great lover on the silver screen, but you've probably never heard of me."

A kook, Danny said to himself. A genuine flake.

"We'll talk about it some other time. But right now I want to see Mrs. Starbuck," Danny said.

"Why do you want to see her?"

"Family affair."

"Who are you?"

"Her cousin. Cousin Danny from Hot Springs."

"She's really Darla McVey, isn't she?"

"Not a chance. She's Mrs. Starbuck. Sorry, Sam."

"I don't believe you. One star can always recognize another."

"Your prerogative. Now, could you just tell me where I can find her?"

"She lives in the room opposite mine. I'll tell her . . ." Sam said starting toward the door, but Danny interrupted him.

"No thanks. I'm old enough to introduce myself. Stay with it, boy," Danny said and left.

Old movie stars never die, Danny thought wryly as he stepped across the hall, even if they have to live in old photos on ratty walls in shabby boarding houses in the wrong end of town. He tapped on the door. A moment later it opened.

No, he thought, looking at her, if he had passed her on the street he would never have known her. Looking straight at her, knowing it was she, yes. But where had it all gone? The winsome look, the quiet blue eyes, the fresh buoyant personality that her brooding nature could never hide . . . all dim, like something passed behind a cloud. The blonde hair had been allowed to turn back to its original

drab brown. The inexorable advance of age had been allowed to creep unresisted into her eyes, around her mouth. A badly tarnished golden girl. Gone, too, were the showy and elegant Hollywood trappings, replaced by a cheap brown dress, flat shoes.

She recognized him immediately. He saw that, and was flattered by it.

"What do you want?" she asked sullenly.

"May I?"

She demurred for a moment, then let him in and closed the door behind him. He took a long, close look at everything: the brass bedstead, the shabby furniture, the flaking walls, the bare floor.

He said, "If I were a poet, Darla, I would cry, 'O!'"

"But you're not a poet."

"No," he said shaking his head with the memory of some regret.

"What do you want, Danny?"

"A story."

"I've been reading your stories for years," she said. "You seem to be doing well for yourself."

"Thank you, Darla," he said with mock sincerity. "I'm glad to see you've kept in touch with the old country, however vicariously."

"But there's no story here. No interviews. You're not going to drag me up out of the past to give your readers a sob-sister human

interest yarn. It's not what I want."

"It's not what I want either, Darla. I want something more than that. May I sit down?"

She said nothing and he sat himself comfortably in a patched easy chair. He sighed.

"I've come a long way, Darla," he said. "But it's a big story. For both of us. My editor authorized me to mention large sums of money. Could you use money?"

"Don't make bad jokes, Danny."

"I'm trying not to be funny."

"My story isn't that important. Someone's been deluding you."

"Oh, it's important all right. I'll tell you what it's all about. Do you remember a little actress named Audrey Elliott? Of course you do. You were there that night . . . when she went out the window. We were all there . . . you and me . . . and J. J. It was certainly a tragic thing. Suicide, the papers called it."

"Wasn't it?"

"Was it? How do you know?"

"What else could it have been?"

Darla said quietly. She stood by the window and stared pensively through the sun-whitened curtains.

"I don't know. Maybe you can tell me. You were there. Don't tell me you weren't. I came into the room a moment after it happened. J. J. was rushing out and you were standing there. I'll tell you how

you happened to be standing there. You went into the bathroom to powder your nose, and that bathroom adjoined two rooms and when you came out you stepped into the wrong one. So you were standing there when it happened."

"How do you know?"

"Because that's how it happened. I worked it out. I think I knew immediately. But then you faded out. You saw something that either shocked or frightened the hell out of you, enough to make you leave Hollywood and a golden career to run away and hide . . . to lose yourself in dumps like this. What did you see, Darla?"

"What do you want, Danny?" she asked listlessly. "Why don't you leave me alone?"

"I'll tell you what I want. J. J. is a big, big man. Always was. But now he's going to be bigger than ever. He's getting an appointment from the President as some sort of cultural emissary overseas. Real big stuff. But my editor wants him, wants him real bad. 'I can get him for you,' I said. But it would cost. He gave me a blank check."

"Yes, I read about J. J.," she said.

"You're going to help us get him, Darla. There'll be enough money in it for you to last you the rest of your life. And there will be satisfaction, personal and moral."

"What do you want from me?"

"I want to know what you saw that night," Danny said, watching her figure keenly, shrewdly.

She closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head.

"Go away, Danny."

"There's nothing to be afraid of. After it's over you can go right on back to obscurity if you choose . . . but a more luxurious kind. You'll have a hundred thousand dollars to live with, Darla . . . as well as the satisfaction of knowing that girl will be sleeping easier in her grave."

"J. J. is too big."

"That's the whole point. He's been stepping on people for years. Little people and big people. He stepped on you. Your fear of him drove you out of Hollywood. Didn't it, Darla?"

She folded her arms and stared stonily out the window.

"Didn't it, Darla?"

"Come back tomorrow, Danny."

"You're not going to run out on me?"

"That's your problem. Come back tomorrow."

When he left the house Danny found himself being followed by Sam Jaspers. He waited and let the little man catch up to him.

"What do you want?" Danny asked.

"What did she say? You're not

taking her away, are you?" the little man asked anxiously.

"Of course not. She wants to leave but I'm trying to talk her out of it. As a matter of fact you can do me a favor, little man," Danny said putting his arm around Sam's shoulders and assuming his most confidential manner. "Look, you don't want her to leave Parksfield and neither do I. I want her to stay here. She's happy here. She likes you."

"Likes me?" Sam asked incredulously, excitedly.

"Of course. She really *is* Darla McVey, of course, but she asked me to beg you not to say anything to anybody about it, ever."

"Of course not," Sam said stoutly.

"It's sort of a lover's secret, you know?"

"A *lover's* secret?"

"That's it exactly. Now, here's what I want you to do. Keep an eye on her, follow her if she leaves the house. Don't let her see you, of course."

"Like in that movie," Sam said eagerly, "where her lover follows them to . . ."

"That's the one," Danny said patting Sam on the chest. "You've got it now. If she goes anywhere out of the ordinary you call me at the hotel. Ask for room 212. Got it?"

"Yes," Sam said. "I'll do it."

Danny left the little man there and began the hike back to the hotel. There, he lay down on the bed in his room and lighted a cigarette and blew smoke rings at the ceiling with deep and smug satisfaction.

But there was no need for Sam Jaspers' watchfulness, vigilant though it was. Darla did not leave her room that day. She sat by her window and thought over and over about Danny South's offer, and gradually her mind drifted back into the past, that gaudy tinsel past which had not even seemed real when it was occurring and now in retrospect seemed not only unreal but incredible.

From the night Audrey Elliott had gone out of that hotel window Darla's life had been different. That night had halved her life with a brutal incision and it had seemed she would have to live the second half forever in this obscure and lonely room.

It had been a gay party in the upper floor suite of the hotel. The rooms had been crowded with people. She remembered streamers fluttering and balloons popping and trays of drinks being balanced on poised fingertips floating over heads. People had been talking to her from all directions. As the place continued to fill up she be-

gan feeling a headache and went to the bathroom to throw cold water on her face. Pushing her way through the noisy crowd she passed through a bedroom and closed the bathroom door. There she washed her face. After towel-ing herself she inadvertently went out the other door. That was when she saw it. She had begun to hear it even as she opened the door and stepped quietly and unnoticed into the room. The girl's voice was pleading, the man's angry and sur-ly. What she saw was J. J. Miller-man moving menacingly upon the frightened, retreating Audrey El-liott whose dress was torn, one sleeve hanging in shreds. She was whimpering in a scared, plaintive voice,

"No, Mr. Millerman. Please no!"

J. J. raised his right arm and drew his hand back and muttered something in that growling unap-peasable voice of his and as he struck at her Audrey Elliott leaped back, lost her balance and fell over the low window sill and through the open window. A scream shot up, and it was over. Darla gasped. J. J. wheeled and glared at her, then turned and rushed from the room. A moment later Danny South ran in. Then everything be-came chaotic. Then Darla fainted. So that was what they wanted her to say now. That Audrey El-

liott had not jumped from the window in drunken suicide (as everyone believed). They wanted her to say that J. J. had driven the girl to it, had all but thrown Au-drey Elliott out the window. Darla remembered that terrifying four A.M. phone call she received that same night, the voice unmistak-ably that of J. J., dark and domi-neering, saying to her sleep befud-dled senses, "You saw nothing. Nothing. Nothing," and then hanging up. That was when she had decided to leave, to run away and hide forever, not only in fear of her life but because she had to get away from the rottenness, the horror.

But now. She was tired of it, the poverty, the privation, as well as the gnawing of her conscience. What money she had saved was gradually running out. She would have no choice but to take some kind of work soon, and that en-tailed the threat of recognition and all the old stories and the old questions starting up again. But one hundred thousand dollars could, by the economics she had learned during the past fifteen years, carry her comfortably for the rest of her life. She would be able to buy herself new clothes, eat bet-ter food, live in better surround-ings . . . and perhaps even help her gain back some of the self-re-

spect she had lost when fleeing.

She spent a sleepless night. Over and over the question ran in remorseless refrain through her mind: 'Why should I continue to make this sacrifice? Why?' Over and over she could hear the last scream of Audrey Elliott.

The following morning Danny South, to his surprise and pleasure, received a visitor.

"Well, Darla," he said, "what have you decided?"

"I've decided to do the right thing, finally."

"Money does talk the loudest after all, eh? Well, I don't blame you. A hundred thousand, maybe even a little extra."

"I'll tell you the whole story," Darla said wearily. "I'm tired of it. I'm just tired of living with it."

"You'll tell me everything?"

"Everything," she said with bitterness.

"Enough to finish off J. J.?"

"More than enough. I don't know what they'll call it, murder or manslaughter or whatever . . . but it will be enough."

Danny clapped his hands. "The story of the century," he said buoyantly. "Let's get out of here and talk about it."

Leaving the hotel they began walking. Led on by Danny, Darla

began recounting what she had seen that night in the hotel bedroom, remembering details she thought she had forgotten. Talking about it began bringing it all back to her, even the last words uttered by the frightened girl. Danny made her tell it over and over. It was as he had suspected all these years, he had always known this truth, and now it was being confirmed by the one person who had seen it happen.

They wandered away from the town, through a park and into a rather heavily wooded area, discussing the story, the details, the probable consequences.

"You're not afraid?" Danny asked.

"Let him be afraid now," she said.

"You won't recant at the last minute?"

"No," she said firmly. "Telling it has taken a great burden from my mind. You don't know how it's been all these years. You don't know how much cleaner and easier I'm beginning to feel."

They were now in quite a lonely, unfrequented area. It was very quiet except for a scattering of melodious bird trills high in the stately trees.

"It's ironic, too," Danny said. "I saw J. J. just before I left Hollywood. We were talking about this

big presidential appointment he was getting. It means an awful lot to him. Do you know what he offered me? His job as studio head as long as he was on leave. That's an awfully big job."

"I'm sure it was a temptation," Darla said.

"Quite," Danny said quietly. "But there were strings attached."

"I don't doubt, knowing him."

"He said, 'Danny, you know something about me. And so does somebody else.'" There was a certain peculiar flatness in Danny's voice now. Darla stopped and looked at him, first curiously, then with growing mistrust.

"You've been on his mind for all these years, Darla," he said. "He's never been quite sure about you, and now he can no longer afford to be unsure. Find her, he said. Find out if she'll talk, if there's anything that can possibly induce her to talk: not if she'll keep silent, but if she'll talk. Settle it, he said, and you can name your price."

They faced each other, Darla's face filling with alarm.

"I'm sure you understand, Darla," Danny said, a smile on his lips. Suddenly his hands sprang to Darla's throat before she had a chance to cry out. He threw her to the ground, his face suddenly wild

and maniacal. "Understand, Darla," he gasped, his fingers working into her throat, his knees pinning her struggling body. "*Head of the studio, Darla. Think what that means. You can't blame me. Don't worry about my covering it up . . . I've seen enough B-movies . . . I've got it all worked out . . .*"

Then she stopped struggling and her head fell to one side. Danny withdrew his hands. He stood up and backed away, gazing down.

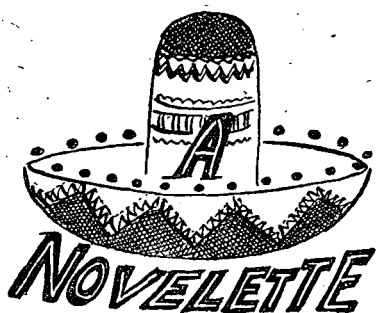
Suddenly Sam Jaspers came bursting through the brush, raising a jackknife high in his hand. As Danny whirled Sam chopped the knife into his neck and cried out:

"And he struck him once . . . then twice . . . then again . . . and the villain fell!"

Danny collapsed, the three savage wounds in his neck pumping out blood, his face a mask of pain and shock and utter astonishment. He rolled over in the leaves, kicking and twitching in agony.

"And then the villain died," Sam Jaspers said mournfully, dropping the knife. "And then the grieving lover knelt to his slain love and put his face close to hers and softly touched her beautiful but lifeless lips with his own."

Sam Jaspers knelt and bent towards Darla.



THE JAIL was made out of a combination adobe brick and concrete block, typically Mexican with the merging of the old and the new. The cell in which he was locked was made of the concrete block.



At one end was an open barred window through which he could see the beach and the motel. The other end was a barred door which swung on hinges out into the cool adobe brick office. The door to the outer office, which was always open, was in the wall to the left of the cell and during the day,

Raymond Packard could look through it and see the occasional car that travelled along the dusty road between Pornada and Ensenada, some twenty miles to the north.

Raymond Packard was the first guest to remain more than one night in the jail since the cell had been added to the building almost two years ago. Fat José Carrillo mentioned this at least twice a day, every time he brought in the tin plate with the tortillas, frijoles and pan; or when he strapped his huge revolver around his huge belly to accompany his prisoner to the out-

door *excusado*. Carrillo was the Chief of Police of Pornada. He was also the chief jailer and sole guardian of the peace in the small ocean-side town on the Baja peninsula. But Carrillo was friendly and seemed sincere in his regrets that he was forced to hold Packard a prisoner.

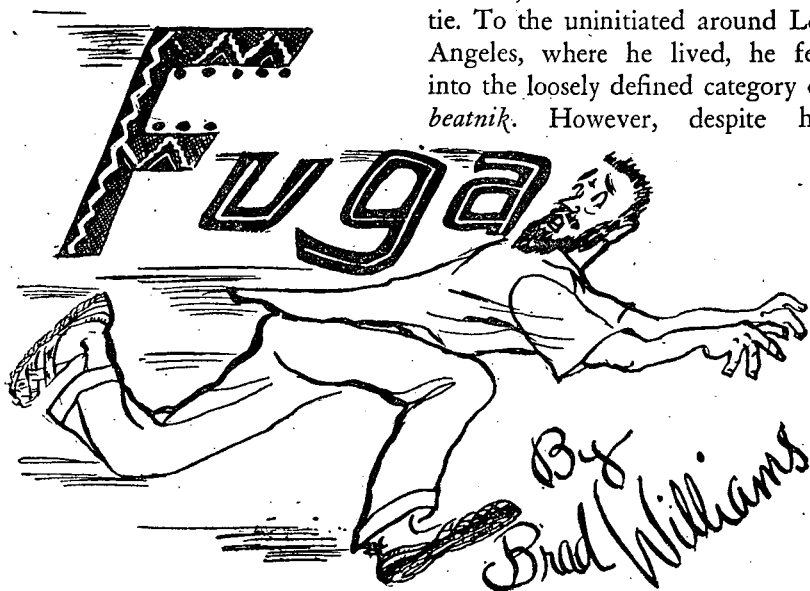
Flight may mean one thing to you and quite another to me. For example, the number of one's flight aboard a jetliner; or the ability to fly (with mechanical aids of course); or the imaginary excursions called flights of fancy. It has still another connotation in this story, and I shall allow you to discover it for yourselves.



"It is only because you are a gringo and you have killed a man," he apologized several times and in that order. "Never before in Pornada has a gringo killed a man and so I must wait for my orders from Mexicali and they must wait for instructions from Mexico."

Raymond Packard was thirty

years old. His last birthday had been a double anniversary of sorts as it had arrived on the start of his second week in the Pornada jail. Physically, he fell into the average statistical column of the tables published by the insurance companies, a little less than six feet tall, about one hundred and sixty pounds in weight. When dressed conventionally, if he held his head erect the end of his full beard extended just below the knot of his tie. To the uninitiated around Los Angeles, where he lived, he fell into the loosely defined category of *beatnik*. However, despite his



beard and a somewhat parallel attitude toward society, he did not consider himself as such. He was an artist. The insomniac had sold some of his canvases for as much as one thousand dollars, but proceeds from such sales were not his only income. He was retained by three advertising agencies in Los Angeles as a commercial illustrator and thus, he reasoned, he could not be classified as a beatnik. But of course this could change. These accounts probably would be lost long before he ever got out of Mexico.

Shortly before noon on the tenth day of his imprisonment, a police car drove into Pornada from the north, its wand of authority jutting out of the rear fender and whipping the air as the machine swayed on the rough road. Nervously, he watched the vehicle until it disappeared around the curve of the hill, then slowly he walked over to the cell window. The car took a long time to complete the circle and when it finally did appear, it did not immediately turn up the rutted path to the jail. Instead, it slid into a parking stall in front of the motel, stopping next to Ray's dusty convertible. Carrillo stepped out of one door. The driver, a giant of a man, rose up from the other side, his shoulders towering above the roof of the car. Both

men casually looked over the convertible, then strolled into the motel. They wouldn't see much after ten days, Ray thought dourly; blood on the cotton rug, broken shards from a tequila bottle. He watched and waited.

A quarter hour passed. The two men came out of the motel, slipped into the police car and presently the vehicle began to bounce up the road toward the jail. With an apprehensive sigh, Ray turned away from the window, pulled a comb from his pocket and ran it through his hair and beard. Then he sat down on the edge of his cot.

The two men came into the building like old buddies entering a bar, laughing at some joke told just out of earshot.

"Señor Packard," Fat Carrillo said proudly. "This is Capitan Eduardo Campeche." He turned the key in the cell door as he spoke, then pulled the barrier wide and with a flourish of his hand, ushered the giant inside.

Capitan Campeche smiled, as if the meeting was an honor, then leaned against the wall. "I am with the Secret Police in Mexico City," he said in flawless English, his voice a deep rumble.

"It hardly seems worth the trouble," Ray replied flatly.

The big detective shrugged slightly. "It is only because every-

one involved is an alien, Señor Packard. Sometimes there are inquiries on a diplomatic level."

"I don't think there will be in this instance."

"The girl is back in Los Angeles." Campeche stated fact rather than implied a question, and from his inside jacket pocket, he pulled out some flimsy papers on which there was typewriting.

"I do not know, Capitan Campeche," Ray answered carefully.

"She drove back to San Diego in the car of the decedent, one William Funk, abandoned it at Lindbergh Field there, and flew to Los Angeles, travelling under her own name, Lois Stuart."

"I have heard the Mexican police are extremely efficient." Ray took an Elegante from the pack in his shirt pocket and lit it. "I gave her the keys to Funk's car by mistake. I guess she was too frightened to come back to the room."

"She is not your wife?"

"No, Señor. Nor is she anyone else's . . . so she did nothing wrong."

The giant shrugged again. "Run through the action once for me."

This would be easy. It had been running through his mind for ten days and as many nights. A man had been killed and he had been the killer. "Lois is a model who works for me often," he said aloud

and slowly, speaking as if he had memorized the sequence of his story. "We finished working early Friday afternoon and decided to spend the weekend at the Papagayo, but because it was a holiday, there wasn't any room. We went on into Ensenada and there still wasn't any room."

"You and Funk and the girl?"

"No, Señor. We met Funk in the bar at Del Pacifico. It was he who told us about Pornada so we drove down here, each in our own cars."

"You knew him before?"

Ray shook his head. "But he was all alone. And he seemed okay, a little square maybe, but harmless."

"But that isn't why you killed him?"

A wit, Ray thought. There was nothing duller than a cop who thought he was a comic. He flicked the ashes from his cigarette into the cuff of his pants. "We went to the cantina in the middle of town after we checked in the motel," he continued aloud. "I was going to buy a bottle of tequila and then we were coming back to the room and have a nightcap and go to bed. But the cantina was a pretty live spot, so we had a few drinks there, danced, listened to the mariachis. When we got back to the motel, Funk went to his cabin; we went to ours. Lois had left her

sweater in the cantina, so I said I'd go back and get it. When I got out to my car, Funk was taking his suitcase out of his. When I got back, maybe fifteen minutes later, I noticed the keys were still in his trunk lock. I took them out, went to my cabin." He paused and inhaled deeply.

"Don't quit now," Campeche said, his lips pulled back into a faint smile. Like a feline, a cat playing with a mouse.

"It happened very quick. The door was unlocked. The lights were on. The nightstand was tipped over. Funk had Lois backed into a corner. Her blouse was ripped and she was struggling with him. I picked up the tequila bottle and hit him and he fell down. I didn't aim or anything, but I think the bottle hit him on the back of his neck and broke it."

The smile faded from Campeche's face. "You did, Mr. Packard," he said with a shrug. "How come she didn't scream when he first grabbed her?"

"I don't know. None of us made any noise. I know I didn't say anything."

"She just let him come?"

"She told me Funk came in a couple of minutes after I left. For a while he just talked and then just before I got back, he went after her." Again he pulled deeply on

his cigarette. "For a little while we thought he was just knocked out. Then we found out he was dead."

"Why didn't you go back with the dame?"

"Well . . . I was the guy who killed him. She hadn't done anything."

Campeche nodded and blew smoke from his cigar toward the ceiling. "And maybe you figured it was only second degree at the most . . . maybe justifiable homicide . . . so you would get off anyway?"

"I'm not a lawyer. I didn't figure anything."

"You'll have to stand trial in Mexicali." Campeche looked at the red end of his cigar thoughtfully. "The calendar's pretty crowded up there. It'll be a couple of years before the case will come up."

"Two years!"

"Maybe more."

Ray dropped his cigarette on the stone floor. His leg shook as he ground the butt with the sole of his huarache and he sensed a flush starting on his face. A jail term was expected . . . but to serve two years before he was sentenced was ridiculous. "Will I be able to get bail?"

Campeche slowly shook his head. "We wouldn't be able to extradite you from California, may-

be. We can't take that chance."

"A real great system," Ray said bitterly. "That's just a real great system."

"You should have thought of this before you clobbered a gringo in Baja. Don't forget, it costs us money to feed you . . . and you'll probably get sick on the food, so we'll have to treat you."

"For God's sake . . . this guy was molesting her!"

"It would have been better all around if you had let him," Fat Carrillo said and laughed.

Ray stared at the two men incredulously, not believing he had heard correctly. The Latins were supposed to be reasonable . . . more understanding than the Saxons for crimes of passion. "You don't understand," he protested, struggling to control his temper. "She isn't that kind of a girl."

Campeche shrugged indifferently, dropped his arm around Fat Carrillo's shoulders and guided him out into the office. "We're having a little trouble with the body," the detective said casually to the Police Chief. "It's still in Tijuana. Apparently this Funk had no relatives."

"There are no facilities here, Capitan."

"I understand." Campeche studied the papers in his hand for a moment, then stuffed them back

in his jacket pocket. "Let's go," he said. "We'll get the statements from the other witnesses before I take the gringo back."

Fat Carrillo nodded, hastily banged the steel door shut, pulled out the key, then scurried after the hard-boiled detective from Mexico City.

For a long time after the police car pulled away, Ray lay quietly on his bunk. He was stunned, more shocked, he thought, than he had been when he first realized that he had killed the greasy little Funk. Terrible as the taking of a life was, it had been both unintentional and justifiable. But this stupid gorilla Campeche obviously did not believe him. The puerile mind inside the big hulk had decided long ago that the killing was the outgrowth of some cheap shackup. Angrily, Ray smashed his fist into his palm and stood up.

He went to the window and looked out. A couple of cars, in addition to his own, were parked in front of the motel. From one of the cabins, a criada waved a shag rug as if it was a signal. Behind the cabins on the beach, a couple sunned, bodies close to each other. It would be a long time before he was that close to a female again, he thought bitterly.

Turning, he went across the cell to the gate and leaned against the

bars. The gate moved slightly and he leaped back, startled. It was open!

Ley de fuga! The Latin answer to capital punishment when there was no legal execution. "The prisoner was shot while trying to escape."

Skin prickling in sudden fear, he backed away from the door, moving toward the cot. Two years or maybe more before he was brought to trial . . . and what a mockery the trial would be. With his limited Spanish he would understand none of it. Pausing, he stared at the gate, now slightly ajar. Fat Carrillo was a lackey to the giant from the capital. His whole manner showed this . . . fawning . . . laughing obeisantly . . . so anxious to hurry after the captain that he had pulled the key out of the lock before he turned it.

Slowly, Ray shuffled toward the gate again and pushed it with his foot. The heavy gate squeaked as it moved outward under the steady pressure. Odd he had not noticed the squeak before. Nothing happened. But nothing could happen yet. Both Fat Carrillo and Campeche had climbed into the police car and it had driven away. There had been no break in the even purr of the engine, as there would have been had it stopped to let Fat Carrillo out.

Tentatively, he stepped into the opening and leaned against the jamb. It was about seventy miles and three cities to the border . . . and only one road between here and there; one road with nothing but a few dead-end and dirt paths intercepting. Ley de fuga . . . But there was no one in the jail. Cautiously, his heart thudding against his chest, he moved out into the office toward a war surplus type desk in the corner. Gently he pulled open the center drawer. Familiar car keys, attached to the equally familiar fish head clip lay on top of his wallet. Even the money was intact . . . little more than one hundred dollars.

Nervously, he wiped the corners of his mouth and his mustache with the back of his hand and moved toward the outer door. His huaraches squeaked loudly and he cursed the sudden impulse that had made him buy them in Tijuana on the way down. His clothes in the motel would have to be left behind, but they were a cheap price to pay for two years . . . two years in a stinking Mexicali jail before they would even bring him to trial. He stepped into the outdoors and slid along the adobe to the corner.

Pressing against the wall, he peered down into the town. The police car was parked directly in

front of the cantina. Down the center of the main street, an Indian with a serape and sombrero, bounced along on the high rump of a burro. A couple of other Indians lounged against an adobe wall, wide brimmed hats tipped low on their faces as if posing for a tourist's camera.

Quite possibly he could reach his car without being seen. No, he would be seen of course, but only by Indians and they would stare blankly at anyone who interrogated them . . . or would they? But what difference did it make? Assume he could get the car out of the hotel lot without the owner, Señora Hernandez, raising the alarm; he would still have to drive

it directly past the cantina to reach the highway. And there was only one highway between here and the border. There were no telephones in Pornada, but there was an aerial projecting from the rear fender of Campeche's prowler car.

Gripping his car keys tightly in his palm, he pushed away from the wall. The heat from the sun struck him like a hot Santa Ana wind and the glare turned his eyes into mere slits. Defiantly he stopped and turned toward the town, daring the ley de fuga. The sounds carried clearly. A seagull cried raucously, as if sounding the alarm. Surf crashed on the sandy shore and from the town, the clomp of the burros' hooves on the hard packed earth of the street drifted toward him like an erratic slow beat of a finger on a bongo drum.

With a deep breath, he moved toward the motel, carefully placing one foot in front of the other. The couple on the beach parted. The man rose, then helped the girl to her feet and waited as she tugged at her bathing suit. They strolled toward the motel. A cabin door opened and again a white shag throw rug was shaken vigorously . . . a signal? Ray paused, glancing around him desperately. No one seemed to notice him.

Suddenly an engine roared alive and he wheeled toward the town.



A combined cloud of dust and burning oil boiled into the air from the exhaust of an ancient bus parked in front of the post office, one cloud bursting below another as the unseen driver rhythmically pressed down on the accelerator. The unmuffled engine sputtered loudly like a string of fire-crackers every time he released the pressure on the throttle.

Abruptly, Ray wheeled again and ran back toward the small jail. He veered around it like a deer in flight, then slid down the hill. He ran across the small mesa to the dirt highway and then, panting, slowly began to walk toward the north. Before he had completely caught his breath, the bus sputtered around the hill which hid the town.

Ray turned, stepped out into the road and held up his hand. The bus slowed and stopped. A rooster in a crate on top of the vehicle crowed feebly in protest.

"Donde vas, Señor?" The driver grinned. "Where are you going?"

"Ensenada."

"Two dollars, Señor." The youthful pilot goosed the engine again as Ray stepped into the vehicle.

"It is very expensive," Ray said, remembering that he should bargain to allay suspicion.

"One-fifty," the driver agreed.

He pocketed the money, then shifted gears as Ray slowly lurched his way back into the machine.

A dozen people on the bus stared at him with flat, expressionless faces; all Indians, with black button eyes. The females wore rebozos around their shoulders despite the heat. The men sat stiffly in the hard seats, their backs to the windows. Only the seat across the rear of the bus faced toward the front. There was a space in the middle.

Dust swirled from under the double rear wheels, skidded around the square stern of the bus, then hung over the road like heavy fog. It completely obliterated the highway, its sides and everything behind it. But it was ostrich security. Ray could not see back beyond the dust, but the dust cloud could be spotted for miles.

Two years . . . or maybe more. How long did he have? Usually, during the daytime, Fat Carrillo dropped by the jail about every three hours. With Campeche in town, he might check more often, to boast of his efficiency. Campeche had said they were going to check witnesses. There were only two . . . the young Mexican bartender in the cantina and Señora Hernandez, whom he had asked to call the police. How long would it take to interview two witnesses? . . . a half

hour? He glanced at his watch, then smiled wryly. He didn't know how long he had been gone because he had forgotten to look at it when he started. The bus roared on, not moving very fast despite the noise and illusion of speed.

Approximately a half hour later, the dust cloud disappeared and the ride became smoother as the wheels struck asphalt. The pavement had ended about seven miles from Ensenada, he recalled. It was almost too easy. As the thought occurred, Ray turned and looked out of the dusty rear window. Far down the road, another cloud of dust boiled up behind a small dot, moving up fast.

He slouched down in his seat, head even with the grimy plastic upholstery. The bus slowed and Ray, looking ahead, watched the driver staring through the rear view mirror. His eyes dropped down toward Ray, speculatively, then back up to the mirror and then the bus veered over to the right slightly as a car whooshed past on the left. But no siren sounded. The bus driver did not brake his vehicle. Instead, he slowly resumed his speed.

With a partially concealed sigh, Ray straightened and tipped his head slightly, trying to see through the forward windshield. The car was out of sight. A young Indian

at his side turned and stared intently toward him.

"Por Castro?" the Indian asked presently in little more than a whisper, his face expressionless.

Ray smiled and stroked his beard, then slowly shook his head. The Indian looked away.

The bus puffed into the outskirts of the city. Traffic increased. A blue and white patrol car slid past the window. Cops, in khaki uniforms, waved them through the intersections. The bus turned a corner and jerked to a stop in front of a depot. It was precisely three o'clock.

Everything seemed normal. Tourists and Indians drifted past on the street. Ray paused beside the driver. "Do you go to Tijuana?"

"In maybe two hours, Señor, there is another bus that goes to Tijuana."

Two hours . . . two years or maybe more. Time was twos plus maybe. He swung down onto the sidewalk. In two hours the alarm surely would be out. Carrillo would remember the bus that had left Pornada and the bus driver would remember the man with the beard. he had picked up on the highway near the jail. And there still was only one road north. At any one of a hundred places along the fifty mile stretch a roadblock could be

set up, with no way to by-pass it.

An older woman, shaped like a squashed S and wearing a woollen dress over a plethora of undergarments, stopped and peered at him as if he was a sidewalk canvas. He scratched himself as he brushed past and then laughed at her sudden gasp. Now that he was an outlaw he could afford to be completely antisocial.

He walked diagonally across the street, paused in front of a small bar, then entered. The signs were all in English. A bartender briskly polished a mahogany counter in front of him. "Yes, sir?"

"A beer and a hamburger."

"Sure."

It was like a Hollywood drive-in. The hamburger, almost instantly placed in front of him, was soggy and cold. The beer was excellent, however. "Where can I rent a car around here?"

The bartender shrugged. "There are many taxis, sir."

"I want a U-Drive-It. Like I could leave in Tijuana."

The bartender shook his head. "There's a bus that leaves around five. Tomorrow morning there's a plane."

"I don't want to wait."

"A cab would take you up, sir. Probably would want about twenty-five or thirty bucks. It's fifty miles up there."

"I know, and well worth it."

A cab might be the answer at that. He glanced at his watch. It was only an hour's ride to the border and if he continued lucky he might get across the border before Fat Carrillo got back to the jail. Finishing his beer, he dropped a dollar bill on the bar and went back to the street. He started to cross, then jumped back on the sidewalk with a sudden catch of breath. His heart pounded furiously as he slid behind a parked car for cover.

Leaning against the wall of the bus station was the giant Campeche, rolling a fresh cigar between his thumb and forefinger.

From any other angle, Ray thought wildly, he would not have seen the detective. The giant was leaning against the far wall and in such a manner that he could look through two windows to the main entrance of the depot. There was no sign of Carrillo. Nor was there any sign of the police car. Swearing softly, Ray backed away, keeping the parked car between him and Campeche's line of vision.

Something moved in back of him and he wheeled around. A young girl, tourist type, side-stepped, then tipped her head, looking at him curiously.

"Excuse me," he muttered. He moved past her and strode rapidly

to the end of the block. As he turned the corner, he broke into a half run, heading toward the ocean, only half aware that he again was swearing softly, monotonously under his breath.

Ensenada was a small town. There was no place to hide for long. If Campeche was looking, so were all the other police. They knew their quarry was in Ensenada... the bus driver would have told them this.

He ran across the street toward the Hotel Bahia, then abruptly slowed to a walk when he noticed a barber in an open doorway watching curiously. There was no way out. The highway would be watched. The airport would be guarded... the bus station sealed. But there was no place to stay. As soon as the exits were bottled, then the canvas of the town would start. And he knew nobody in Ensenada.

Far ahead of him, a police car turned into the waterfront street. He veered between two buildings and down a flight of steps leading to the beach.

"You wanta see a good show, Mister?" An urchin on the bottom step jumped up, leered, then shrugged and sat down as Ray silently passed.

Fifty miles to the border. But who in hell could walk fifty miles?

He paused and glanced over his shoulder. Apparently no one saw him as a fugitive... yet. At least, there was no sign of pursuit here. If he followed the coast north, it would be at least sixty miles to the border. At five miles an hour, it would take twelve hours. How fast did a man walk on sand? Behind him, a siren wailed and again he glanced back. The urchin jumped to his feet and scrambled up the stairs.

He mastered an impulse to run. A running man attracted attention. Sand spilled into his huaraches and he took them off, carrying them in his hand. This would appear normal; a tourist out for a walk along the shore. But sixty miles barefoot was impossible. The siren wailed louder and again he looked back. A fire truck raced through an intersection then turned up the winding road which led to the high hilled residential section overlooking the community.

To his left, a large sloop skilfully glided into the harbor, tacking between the breakwaters. Another half dozen yachts lay at anchor in the sheltered water and from one, hi-fi music drifted into shore. He could sail. He could steal a boat and sail it to San Diego. But they would capture him before he passed the jetty. He walked on.

Within an hour he was tired. No

one walked anymore. The sand gradually disappeared, turning into slippery pebbles covered with moss and seaweed. Pausing, he put on his huaraches, conscious that he could still hear the sounds of Ensenada behind him, a distant auto horn, a faint cry. He could not stop.

About now, possibly, a policeman was entering a small bar. "Yeah, he was in here a while back . . . guy with a beard, yeah. He had a hamburger and a beer."

Or the huge Campeche bent over to talk to a small urchin. "Si, Señor. He went over there," pointing north along the shoreline.

He jumped up onto a large, wet piece of driftwood. His foot slipped, throwing him from the log to the wet stones. He lay quietly, panting, looking out to sea. The sun, a huge red ball, was flattened on the bottom where it struck the ocean. Rolling on his elbow, he looked back toward the land. Dusk was very near. High overhead, an invisible jet plane moved slowly through the sky, its vapor trail a fire streamer, reflecting the red from the sun. The sun gathered speed in its plunge and now he could actually see the curvature of the earth in it. An orange dwarf . . . a very small, unstable star which could explode at any second. It looked now as if it was

slowly being extinguished as it dipped into the ocean. What had happened and what would happen was unimportant. He started to rise, then froze as a light flashed on the bluff behind him. It was a car reflecting the dying glare of the sun in its windshield.

Instinctively, he threw himself on the pebbles, pressing close to the large piece of driftwood that had toppled him. Then, wriggling like a worm, he pulled himself up to the end of the log to peer around it. The car was a silhouette with a long wand riding up in back of it, swaying back and forth lazily on its powerful spring. The door opened and another shadow stepped out . . . a giant shadow that moved to the edge of the bluff. Both hands raised to its eyes and the shadow pivoted. Binoculars, sweeping the beach! Frantically Ray burrowed back in the pebbles. Then he stopped, fearful that the breeze would carry the sound of his movement up the slope.

Presently the sun disappeared. For a brief moment, the horizon glowed. Then this light slowly faded away and as if this was a signal, the offshore breeze freshened. For a long time, he lay motionless, straining for some sound . . . a step crunching on the gravel to foretell his discovery . . . the sound of a car starting to signal

that he had not been seen. But the surf was too loud. After a while he could no longer stand the suspense and he sat up abruptly. The police car was gone.

But behind the spot where it had been parked was a faint red glow, flashing like a rotary emergency light on a police car. He jumped to his feet and ran along the shore. The pebbles turned back into sand as he rounded a small point. He halted. Here the shoreline curved in a small crescent and scattered along the beach were a dozen gaily striped cabanas, the bright reds and whites bright even in the dusk. The Papagayo. Red light from a huge neon sign at the resort flickered over the canvas beach shelters at the bottom of the hill. For a long moment he stared incredulously, first at the cabanas, then up the winding steps to the hotel and finally on the dial of his watch. Four hours had passed since he left Ensenada and he had travelled less than seven miles . . . an average of two miles an hour. At this speed, Tijuana was thirty hours distant. A jet plane could make three round trips between Los Angeles and New York in the same length of time. This was ridiculous. The road would be safe at night. There was little traffic and when a car came, he could see it in plenty of time to leave the

road. He decided to take a chance.

Boldly he walked up the stairs. Only a half dozen cars were parked outside the resort. Up here, sounds carried clearly. A girl, out of sight, giggled. Glasses tinkled on the patio to a soft mariachi background. Glare from the sign and floodlights extended from the top of the stairs, across the parking lot to the wall of the hotel.

"Señor."

He jumped, spinning in the direction of the voice. It belonged to an older man in a dirty khaki uniform, a guard for the parking lot.

"Andele," the watchman said, flipping the back of his hand contemptuously. "Move on."

Grimy pants and shirt, slept in for ten days; huaraches over dirt-encrusted feet. Small wonder, Ray thought bitterly, that the guard saw only a tramp in front of him. "Ya mi voy," Ray said sullenly, shuffling toward the exit. "I'm going." At the gate he paused and looked back. The guard had followed him and now he, in turn, stopped, staring speculatively. "Go shine your cars," Ray said angrily.

Again the guard flicked his hand as if brushing away a troublesome insect. Eleven days ago it had probably been the same flunky who bowed and scraped when they drove into the place. Ray spat on the ground, then stepped out onto

the road leading to the main highway.

It was easy to move along the highway at night. There was little traffic and few sounds. The few cars there were, hurtled by. At first, when the road was straight, he heard the distant scream of the approaching engine about the same moment he saw the headlights as a single white pinpoint on the highway. There was more than enough time to leave the road and hide in a barranca. Later on in the night, the highway began to curve lazily through the hills and then he heard the engines long before he saw the lights. Finally he did not bother to leave the pavement, staggering on and on, his mind dull, projecting no thought other than the placing of one foot in front of another.

Eventually he became aware that he was thirsty and when this thought penetrated his conscious mind, the thirst became overbearing. After a while he saw a faint flickering yellow light far off the road and he turned into the field, heading toward it. A wire fence struck him across the chest. A horse neighed and galloped away with a quick pounding of hooves. Bending over slowly, he eased through the strands and stepped in mud. He wouldn't have to go to the house. Almost at his side was

a livestock watering trough. He dropped to his knees and dipped his mouth to the water like an animal and when slaked, crawled a few feet away on his knees, then stretched out on the soft ground.

Somewhere nearby a dog barked loudly and then the outcry was joined by another. He was wet and the sun was red through his closed eyelids. His neck was stiff and his body ached in a hundred muscles. Rolling over on his stomach, he opened his eyes. Two curs bolted backwards and their barking became more frenzied. A short distance in back of the dogs, a teenage boy stood silently, staring, his face a blank. Then, as Ray struggled to his feet, the boy turned and started to run.

"Alto!" Ray cried, his voice a harsh rasp. "Stop!"

The youth obeyed, turning around.

"It's all right, friend," Ray said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I was drunk."

"Borracho?" The youth tipped his head curiously, like a puppy.

"That's right . . . one great big borracho last night."

The boy shrugged slightly and hissed to the dogs who immediately fell silent.

"Do you have coffee?" Ray nodded toward the small house in the distance. "I'll pay you."

Slowly the youth raised his hand and held his thumb and forefinger about a quarter inch apart. Sign language . . . Wait for a minute. Then abruptly he turned and ran toward the house, the dogs loping along at his heels.

It had been a mistake, Ray thought suddenly with a nervous glance toward the highway. The parents would ask questions. They might have a radio and surely the news had been broadcast that a gringo murderer had escaped from Pornada and was believed heading toward the border . . . a killer with a long beard.

Turning, he sloughed his way through the mud to the fence and then across the marshy grass to the highway. Either the huaraches had shrunk during the night or his feet had swollen, for the leather bindings cut painfully into the back of his feet and beneath his ankles. He sat down and tried to pull them off. They wouldn't move. Angry red skin bulged painfully both above and below the bindings. He fumbled in his pocket for his penknife. It was gone. So was his loose change. But his wallet was still in his hip pocket.

An engine started . . . an old one with no exhaust muffler and he traced the sound to a Model A Ford pickup truck at the house of the young boy and his dogs. It

bounced along a dusty sideroad to the highway, two persons in the front seat, and when it reached the asphalt, it turned north in his direction. Wincing with pain from his bound feet, Ray hobbled erect as the truck drew abreast and stopped.

It was the same boy, but the driver was very old, probably his grandfather. Neither said a word; they made no gesture.

Ray pointed to his feet, held one foot up, then made a scissoring motion with two fingers. The boy nodded gravely, pulled a switchblade knife from his pocket and passed it down, handle extended.

Trusting souls, Ray thought wryly as he slid the razor sharp blade under the leather binding. No pressure was needed. The leather strap parted as if it was paper. "Your truck was made the year I was born," he said aloud.

"Mandel" the old man said.

"Never mind." His feet free from the Indian shoes began to tingle and itch, the way a limb tingled after it had fallen asleep. Slowly Ray folded the knife and passed it back. Roadblocks or not, he could walk no further. Pulling out his wallet, he extracted a twenty dollar bill and held it up. "Tijuana?"

The boy nodded and plucked the bill from his hands as if it was

a ripe cherry on a tree. He looked at it carefully on both sides, then slid across the seat and motioned for Ray to climb in. The seat seemed incredibly soft. The pickup lurched forward.

Ahead of them, a small black sedan swung wide on a curve. It had the appearance of a police car and Ray tensed, glancing toward his companions with quick suspicion. The car whooshed past. Two fishing poles pushed out of a rear window. He sighed and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. It was caked. Bending forward, he tipped the rear view mirror in his direction. At first he stared in disbelief. Then he shook his head and laughed. His hair, his beard, his face were plastered with mud. Shirt and pants were the same. He looked like a ghoul in a Grade B horror picture. The old man smiled politely and turned the mirror back.

Shrugging, Ray rubbed dried mud from the crystal of his watch . . . a little after nine. If his luck held, he should be at the San Ysidro border station in an hour. It was only an hour's drive from Ensenada in an ordinary car. The distance he had walked should make up the difference for the slower speed in the clunker. As soon as he crossed the border, he could shower . . . call Lois collect.

She would come down and get him. His head dropped forward and he fell asleep.

A horn blared almost in his ear, jolting him upright, instantly alert. He was on the outskirts of Tijuana. He was almost safe. The boy smiled and nodded politely. The Mexicans were always very polite, like the Japanese, he thought, looking at his watch. Quarter past ten. And like the Japanese, one never knew what they were thinking. There had been no roadblock. But this was logical. Police rarely kept roadblocks up for more than a few hours. The quarry had either got through by this time or was not going to try.

The old man shifted to a lower gear to climb a small hill. A convertible of the same brand, but thirty years newer, paused at the exit of the Sierra Motel as they approached. A Hollywood type blonde looked up at him as they passed. Her mouth fell open and red fingernails flashed up to a heavily rouged mouth.

"And you too," Ray said aloud, then turned to the boy and gestured for a cigarette. The boy shook his head and shrugged.

The truck caught the green light on the main street and turned

left toward the center of the city. A neat, young Mexican girl on the sidewalk turned to stare at him and with a nervous sigh, Ray slid down in the seat to avoid such attention. The truck sputtered past the Fronton Palace, down past the cellar night clubs and the honky tonks and the markets that stretched for blocks under arcades. The streets became more crowded and a few stared at him curiously, but not with alarm. Then the old man made an abrupt U turn and stopped directly in front of the Ceasar Hotel.

"Tijuana," he said quietly.

"No, no," Ray replied quickly, sitting up. "United States . . . Los Estados Unidos."

"No tengo papeles," the old man replied firmly.

"A la linea," Ray protested, trying to control his rising temper. "To the line."

"Tijuana," the boy echoed. Ominously his hand slipped into his pocket . . . the pocket with the switchblade knife.

Two Mexican pitchmen on the street moved toward the curb in front of the truck. A police whistle trilled shrilly, jerking Ray's attention to the corner. A traffic cop gestured irritably for the old man to get out of the no parking zone.

"Andele," the old man said softly and revved the noisy engine. It

backfired as he eased the pressure on the gas pedal and the explosion turned a dozen heads in their direction.

The whistle shrilled again angrily and the cop started to walk toward them.

"Okay, okay," Ray muttered, then pressing his lips to muzzle his temper, he stepped down on the hot pavement.

The truck lurched into the traffic before Ray stepped up on the curb, racing away as if seeking escape . . . escape from what? One of the pitch artists began to laugh and then was joined by his companion. A middle aged couple with a pinched expression of distaste, paused and stared at him. A street photographer leaned against his gaily caparisoned burro and began to giggle. The traffic cop pushed back his duck billed cap and looked over curiously.

Two cabs were parked diagonally at the corner. Lips still compressed tightly, Ray strode to the nearest one, soles of his feet burning on the hot pavement, pulled open the rear door and jumped in.

The driver, a tough pachuco type, leaned over the back of the front seat. "Where to, buddy?"

"The border."

"Five bucks, buddy."

It was no more than a mile to the border. In Tijuana, the fare should

be no more than fifty cents. "Let's go."

"I don't think you got a fin, buddy."

Contemptuously, Ray pulled out his wallet and removed a ten dollar bill. He snapped it in front of the driver. "You get me there in five minutes and I'll double your fin."

The cab hurtled back in the street, then U-turned and raced down the thoroughfare.

"But don't get us pinched," Ray said sourly, looking back through the rear window. "Either way you get the sawbuck."

The driver nodded, but didn't slow. Tires screamed in protest as the taxi skidded onto the old bridge over the dry Tijuana River then sped toward the border. Ahead of them, just beyond the other end of the bridge was the high arch that marked the Mexican-United States boundary line. On the right side of the arch, a half dozen lanes moved through stalls operated by the U.S. Border Patrol. On the left was the Mexican port of entry.

"Way over to the right, friend," Ray ordered, again glancing back. There were no signs of pursuit. "And as close to the line as you can get."

"I can't go beyond the turnaround, buddy. That's about fifty

yards." The cabby pulled sharply to the right as he swung off the bridge, then braked dramatically along the curb. "Four minutes flat," he announced happily.

About a dozen cars were in the two open lanes leading into the United States. Two Border Patrolmen leaned in windows of the forward vehicles. Another stood on the steps of the Customs Building. Taking a deep breath, Ray nodded, opened the door, then passed the ten dollars to the grinning driver.

He stepped out on the sidewalk and glanced across the small square toward the Mexican port of entry. Two khaki clad guards leaned casually against a pillar. Another waved a tourist through. It was normal. He glanced over his shoulder and froze motionless.

Strolling toward him with a sardonic grin on his face was Campeche. He was only twenty yards distant, his huge body moving with a dreadful feline grace . . . a big cat stalking the immobile lamb. His slow walk was almost hypnotic. So supremely confident he was that he even slowed his pace as he narrowed the distance between them. Ray thought of a wild rabbit, held motionless by the glare of onrushing headlights on a highway.

Then someone began to giggle,

and the giggle broke the spell. He caught a brief impression of a laughing peddler, holding two clay souvenir bulls in his hand as he wheeled around and ran.

His feet slapped the pavement hard, but the pain came in his chest from his tortured breathing. *Ley de fuga*. At this instant, the pistol was being aimed at his back. Ray dodged, jerking first one way and then the other. Campeche wouldn't dare shoot this close to the border, unless he was sure of hitting his target.

Then incredibly the shadow of the arch fell across him. Arms went around him, wrenching him around in a complete circle, then pushing him hard against a wall. Gasping for breath, he followed the arm on his chest up to a shoulder, down to a badge. . . . The U.S. Border Patrol! He was in the United States.

His feet began to burn. A sharp pain lanced his side and his head began to pound unmercifully.

The cop slowly released his grip and backed away, saying nothing, looking at him curiously. Gradually he became aware that everyone

was staring at him now. No one laughed. They all stared, as people will stare at the scene of a fatal auto accident.

Only one person moved . . . Campeche. The big detective, still grinning, walked slowly right up to the arch, then stopped and leaned against one of the stanchions.

"I'm not in Mexico anymore," Ray screamed the words involuntarily.

The big detective nodded slowly, then began to chuckle softly. "Tell me, Mr. Packard," he said presently. "Tell me just one thing."

"What?" Ray's body began to tense. The giant was clever, as well as sadistic. He would pull some trick. Ray glanced around quickly for the Border Patrolman, then frowned suddenly. His own convertible was parked just beyond one of the stalls. His suitcases showed plainly in the rear seat.

"Why in hell didn't you drive up?" Campeche asked.

Ray looked again at his car, then back to the giant. Then, slumping down on the sidewalk he sobbed uncontrollably.





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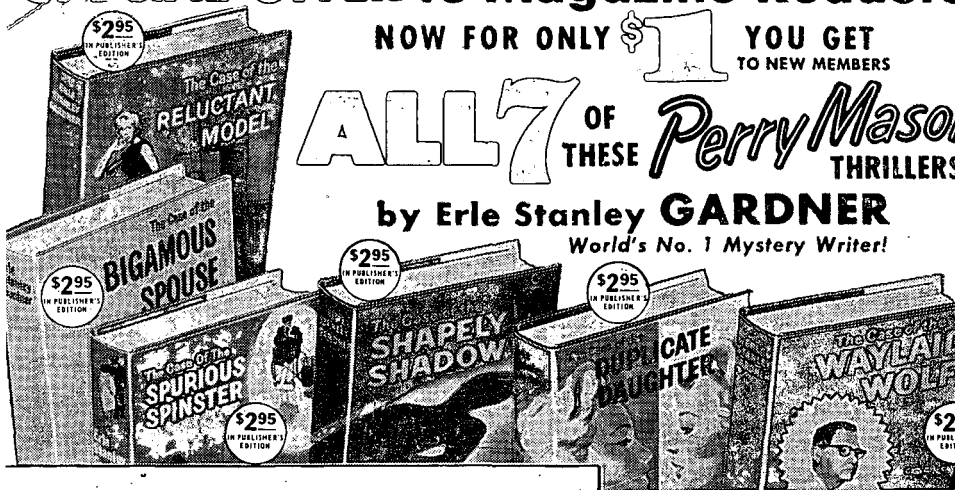
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